

From Mystery to Manners

A Study of Five Detective Novels by Dorothy L. Sayers

Randi Sørsdal

**Master thesis
Department of English
University of Bergen
Spring 2006**

Perhaps because clue making so often involves the routine and minutia of ordinary life no other form of popular writing tells us as much about the age in which it was written than does the detective story.

P.D.James

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: <i>Whose Body?</i>	9
Chapter 2: <i>The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club</i>	23
Chapter 3: <i>Unnatural Death, Strong Poison</i> and Miss Climpson	35
Chapter 4: <i>Gaudy Night</i>	45
Conclusion	71
Bibliography	75

Introduction

“For me, as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol.” This is how W. H. Auden starts his frequently cited essay “The Guilty Vicarage,” written in 1948. He has a basic formula for the genre: “A murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies” (147).

Mystery, thriller, detective story, these are some of the terms used by various writers for the crime or detective fiction genre. John Cawelti’s preferred term is “mystery,” and he describes the fundamental principle of the mystery story as “the investigation and discovery of hidden secrets” (42). Stephen Knight, in his recent book *Crime Fiction 1800-2000* on the development of the genre, discusses the terminology and settles on “crime fiction” as a general descriptive term. He argues that although some call the genre “detective fiction” and others “mystery fiction,” this does not apply generally, because “as a reader soon discovers there are plenty of novels [...] without a detective and nearly as many without even a mystery” (xii). In his view most of the various terms used for the genre refer to sub-genres of crime fiction.

There seems to be a common opinion that the founder of the modern crime story is Edgar Allan Poe. Crime stories had, however, been published before Poe, and Knight argues that *The Newgate Calendar* may be regarded as the original pre-detective stories. It appeared in the 18th century and was a collection of immensely popular crime stories which claimed to be fact, telling the stories of criminals in Newgate Prison. But it was Poe who, according to Knight, “constructed a form strong enough to predict the possibilities of the genre that was not yet in being” (26).

Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) presents the amateur detective Auguste Dupin who by deductive reasoning solves the mystery of the killings which in fact are done by an orangutan. In addition "The Purloined Letter" (1845) and "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842) feature Dupin, and these three stories are regarded as models for later amateur detective fiction, also called stories of ratiocination, specifically in creating the analytical detective.

Detective fiction is mainly Anglo-American. According to Glenn W. Most (346) one may distinguish between two basic traditions, the English and the American. The English tradition starts with Poe, although he is an American, and is brought to its classic form by Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle was directly inspired by Poe. Dennis Porter is of the opinion that "apart from a type of heroic detective, what Doyle acquired above all from Poe was an art of narrative that promotes the reader's pleasure through the calculation of effects of suspense on the way to a surprise denouement" (28). Although there were several interesting detectives in the 19th century, there is only one Great Detective. Conan Doyle was his creator. Sherlock Holmes is "a detective who is highly intelligent, essentially moral, somewhat elitist, all-knowing, disciplinary in knowledge and skills, energetic, eccentric, yet also in touch with the ordinary people who populate the stories" (Knight 55). With Sherlock Holmes the detective was established as central to crime fiction.

Knight argues that after the detective had established himself, the next stage in crime fiction was the insistence on death as the major crime. This had earlier not been the case, and in much of Doyle's work there are other crimes represented, like theft or fraud. In Knight's opinion the causes for this new development may be multiple, but he says that it is in the period between the rise of Sherlock Holmes and the beginning of the 1920s "that death becomes the central theme in crime fiction" (68).

The Golden Age of classic detective fiction is usually taken to mean the time between the two world wars. Typical of these stories, which are often called puzzles or clue-puzzles, is that they take place in closed societies or settings like the village, a city apartment, a locked room. Cawelti states that at the time of Poe the setting performed many functions. Some of these were no longer relevant at the time of the Golden Age, but “the isolated setting has remained popular with the classical detective writers for another reason. It establishes a framework for the treatment of manners and local color in a fashion often reminiscent of the great Victorian novelists.” An example of this is in his opinion Dorothy Sayers’ *Nine Tailors* from 1934. Here the setting is a rural society, “out of Thomas Hardy,” as a frame for the art of bell ringing (97).

The characters in the classical detective story belong mostly to the upper and upper-middle classes. The stories contain lots of clues and red herrings, as they are supposed to be an intellectual game for the reader. The element of ratiocination is important: “Is the problem of sufficient complexity to seriously challenge the ratiocinative powers of the reader?” (107). In contrast to the later so-called hard-boiled detective fiction by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, the clue-puzzles are often bloodless, the murder takes place off-stage. The plot is the important thing, characters are often shallow, they are there only for the sake of the plot and not for any depth of characterization. Dorothy Sayers, in her essay “Aristotle on Detective Fiction,” argues that Aristotle’s writings on tragedy in *Poetics* may be a guide to modern detective fiction and “quotes” him as saying: “The first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of the detective story, is the plot, and the characters come second” (180).

After the First World War the novel replaced to a large extent the short story in detective fiction. In Cawelti’s opinion one of the reasons for this “had to do with the

very artistic potentialities of the genre” (109). In a short story there is not enough time to develop a very elaborate murder plot. According to Julian Symons the appearance of Agatha Christie’s first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), marked the development of the crime novel. He suggests that she was the first to write a “puzzle story which is solely that” (103). Alison Light, commenting on Christie as a constructor of puzzles, defines this type of detective story as “a kind of conundrum whose pleasure derives from trying to guess the murderer, and which sacrifices characterization and plausibility to the exigencies of suspenseful plotting” (65).

During the 1920’s it became important to observe the rules of the genre. There had to be clues from which the detective drew his conclusions by analysis. Symons in his listing of the rules of the formula says that the criminal must be introduced early in the story, and he must not be one of the servants, as they were not considered worthwhile except as servants. The murderer must be part of the same social group as the other suspects, and he could be a professional, like a doctor, a lawyer or a secretary. The social order was fixed, everybody knew his place. The characters were not supposed to be described in any depth, no kind of emotion was advised as this would take the interest away from the plot itself (107).

Symons points out that the classical crime fiction of the Golden Age as a rule ignored the realities of life in the time they were writing about. The unemployment and depression were not issues, neither were the trade unions and the General Strike of 1926, “and when sympathy was expressed for the poor it was not for the unemployed but for those struggling along on a fixed inherited income” (109).

An important point that often has been stressed was that there should be no love interest. Not everybody stuck to this rule. One example which is often cited is E.C. Bentley’s *Trent’s Last Case* (1913) in which the detective falls in love with the woman

he thinks is a murderess. Another writer is of course Dorothy Sayers after she has made Lord Peter Wimsey fall in love with Harriet Vane in *Strong Poison* (1930). Especially interesting for critics has been that Sayers herself in earlier essays about crime fiction strongly advised against any love story. She can accept that “secondary characters” fall in love as long as this does not interfere with the course of the story, but “far more blameworthy are the heroes who insist on fooling about after young women when they ought to be putting their minds on the job of detection” (Winks 78).

The Golden Age is to many critics synonymous with the English detective novel. Among the names most often mentioned as representative of this time are Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Anthony Berkeley, Ngaio Marsh and S. S. Van Dine. Van Dine is American, but he wrote in the traditional English clue-puzzle style.

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) published her first detective novel, *Whose Body?* in 1923. She wrote twelve detective novels, all but one featuring the aristocratic sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey. In addition she also wrote many short stories. Most critics seem to agree that these are much less interesting than her novels. All her novels are written in the time between the two world wars.

In her Introduction to the anthology *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (1928) Sayers, when discussing the future of the detective novel, expresses the opinion that it will probably become more closely linked to the novel of manners, removing itself from the rigid formula of the puzzle story. And in 1937 she repeated this in the essay “Gaudy Night.” Looking back on her writing she said that she had always wanted her books to be “novels of manners instead of pure cross-word puzzles,” and goes on to describe how she in some of her novels had introduced various elements in order to achieve this. Symons is no great admirer of Dorothy Sayers: “There is a breathtaking gap here between intention and achievement.” And he continues: “The

books themselves [...] show an increasing pretentiousness, a dismal sentimentality and a slackening of the close plotting that had been her chief virtue” (133).

Michael Holquist seems to be of a different opinion. He comments in his essay “Whodunit and Other Questions” on a new kind of detective story in the 30’s, which in England was represented by Dorothy Sayers’ “new style”: “The characters were more fully rounded, the settings more ordinary – or at least less formulaic – the plots less implausible. The detective is more human and so are the criminals and the victims” (163).

Dorothy Sayers had two aims with her detective novels. She wanted to entertain, but at the same time to create solid characters and a real world. As mentioned she argued on various occasions that detective novels ought not to be mere puzzles, but novels of manners. She saw Wilkie Collins as a writer who had managed this combination. In her Introduction to *The Moonstone* by Collins she praises him for the way he presents the mystery. In her opinion he has been “very much underrated as regards his competence to create living character and to handle social themes” (ix). I interpret Sayers’ emphasis on the creation of living characters and the handling of social themes as the essence of what she meant by a “novel of manners.”

The aim of my thesis is to examine Dorothy Sayers’ detective novels as a mixed genre, combining the puzzle with the novel of manners as she conceived it; where the characters are not mere pawns to drive the mystery plot forward, but are portrayed as “living” individuals involved in serious social issues and being capable of development. I will further explore to what extent social and political issues treated in her novels reflect British society at the time they were written. I will concentrate on five texts representing the beginning, middle and end of her career as a writer of detective fiction, and which mark a change of focus from mystery to manners. Among the issues I want

to explore are anti-Semitism and class in *Whose Body?*, the legacy of the Great War and modern science in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, the question of the “surplus” women and spiritualism in *Unnatural Death* and *Strong Poison*, and finally the role of women in society in *Gaudy Night* .

Chapter 1. *Whose Body?*

Dorothy L. Sayers graduated from Somerville College, Oxford, in 1915 with first-class honours in modern and medieval languages, but she did not receive her degree until 1920, at the historic ceremony when Oxford's first women graduates were honoured.

Sayers started writing crime fiction in the 1920's. Her first novel *Whose Body?* was published in 1923. At that time detective stories were extremely popular, and Sayers herself was an avid reader of puzzles. She expressed the opinion that detective novels ought to develop into something more than mere puzzles. At one time she wrote that "novelists never present the story as an isolated episode existing solely in virtue of its relation to the mechanics of detection. They are interested in the social background, in manners and morals, in the depiction and interplay of character" (Gaillard 26). When she started writing, her intention was to make her novels more than just conventional puzzles. On the other hand there seems to be no doubt that she needed the money.

Although she enjoyed writing, she says in one of her letters to her parents while she was looking for a publisher for *Whose Body?*, "there is a market for detective literature if one can get in, and he [Lord Peter] might go some way towards providing bread and cheese" (Brabazon 87).

Whose Body? is constructed as a puzzle, but there are also interesting characters, and the reader gets an impression of some of the social issues in England at the time. In addition to the main character, the sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey, several of the other characters introduced in this first novel also appear in later books. Most important of these are his man-servant Mervyn Bunter, his friend, Police Inspector Charles Parker, and his mother, the Dowager Duchess of Denver.

Lord Peter Wimsey lives in a luxurious flat in London with his servant Bunter. He is a wealthy aristocrat, and in the middle of his thirties in this first novel. Dorothy Sayers, herself coming from a middle-class family, enjoyed writing about the aristocracy and giving Lord Peter the money and luxury that she did not have herself. Wimsey is an Oxford graduate, a connoisseur of food and drink, a good cricketer, plays the piano, and is a collector of incunabula. His hobby is criminal investigation, and being of independent means he is in the position that he can carry out investigations whenever he deems it necessary without any professional obligations. He has a mannered speech and a gift for talking piffle, and is on the whole presented as a silly-ass-about-town. Bunter is Wimsey's correct Jeeves-like "man," and also his assistant at times. He photographs fingerprints, interrogates servants and helps with chasing clues. Inspector Parker is employed by Scotland Yard and not as free to carry out investigations as his friend Wimsey. They cooperate on cases. Some years later Parker becomes Chief Inspector and also Wimsey's brother-in-law by marrying his sister Mary. Lord Peter's mother the Dowager Duchess is living on the family estate in Norfolk and provides maternal support. Her shrewdness and good common sense are masked by her endless monologues with numerous associations.

The first pages of *Whose Body?* introduce the reader to Wimsey, Bunter and the Duchess through some lively dialogue. Wimsey is on his way to a book sale, but discovers that he has forgotten the catalogue. Returning in the taxi to the flat which, incidentally, has the address 110A Piccadilly, a clear reference to Sherlock Holmes, he hears Bunter speaking on the telephone. He is told that "Her Grace has just called up from Denver, my lord. I was just saying your lordship had gone to the sale when I heard your lordship's latchkey" (8). Wimsey's mother informs him that she has been told by the vicar's wife that the architect who was supposed to come up that morning to do

some work on the church roof, has rung up to say he could not come. “He was so upset, poor little man. He’d found a dead body in his bath” (8). It appears that the body was of a man, naked except for a pair of pince-nez, “Mrs. Throgmorton positively blushed when she was telling me. I’m afraid people do get a little narrow-minded in country vicarages” (9). The Duchess wants Wimsey to go down to South West London where Mr. Thipps and his mother live to see “if there is anything we can do” (9). Wimsey grins, because “The Duchess was always of the greatest assistance to his hobby of criminal assistance, though she never alluded to it, and maintained a polite fiction of its non-existence” (9). And he answers in his flippant way:

‘Well, thanks awfully for tellin’ me. I think I’ll send Bunter to the sale and toddle round to Battersea now an’ try and console the poor little beast.’ [. . .]
‘Bunter!’ ‘Yes, my lord.’ ‘Her Grace tells me that a respectable Battersea architect has discovered a dead man in his bath.’ ‘Indeed, my lord? That’s very gratifying.’ ‘Very, Bunter. Your choice of words is unerring. I wish Eton and Balliol had done as much for me.’ (9)

This is an example of the style of the first Wimsey book, a style many have found delightful. One immediately associates the dialogue between Wimsey and Bunter with Bertie Wooster and Jeeves.

Having sent Bunter off to the sale, Wimsey has to attend to his dressing by himself, muttering that he has to change his clothes from top-hat and frock-coat because Thipps might mistake him for the undertaker, “a grey suit, I fancy, neat but not gaudy, with a hat to tone suits my other self better. Exit the amateur of first editions; new motive introduced by solo bassoon; enter Sherlock Holmes, disguised as a walking gentleman” (10). And the narrator observes that “he was changing with a rapidity one might not have expected from a man of his mannerisms” (11). Here is the first signal that Wimsey’s flippant manner may be a disguise. His dressing finishes with a monocle

which the reader later learns is a strong magnifying glass, a walking stick is a measuring rod which also contains a sword and a compass in the head, and a flat silver matchbox serves as a torch when he later examines the body.

The body in the bath is a mystery, nobody seems to know how it got there and who it is. The verdict at the inquest is that the man died due to a blow on the cervical spine, but how the injury was inflicted remains unclear. Very soon the body gets linked to the disappearance that same morning of the financier Sir Reuben Levy. Inspector Parker is investigating this case. Both he and Wimsey are, however, convinced that the body in the bath is not Sir Reuben. Wimsey calls the idea “preposterous,” the reason apparently being that the body is uncircumcised. Several critics have commented on this. According to biographer Barbara Reynolds, Sayers had at first been more explicit about this point, but was asked by the publishers to be more discreet (101).

A conventional puzzle needs to have red herrings. *Whose Body?* has several, the most central one being the pair of gold pince-nez. Lord Peter chases the clue by putting an advertisement in *The Times* about it, a method commonly used by Sherlock Holmes in his investigations. Upon getting an answer, Bunter and Wimsey head off to Salisbury. The excursion turns out to be an embarrassing failure, the owner of the pince-nez is a respectable solicitor in his eighties with a bad leg, who had lost his glasses on a trip to London the week before. At the end of the novel the villain himself tells how he had found them at Victoria Station and later got the idea of putting it on the body’s nose, “I saw what distinction they would lend his appearance, besides making it more misleading” (181).

Although the body in the bath is not Sir Reuben Levy, there is a connection between the two, and this connection also provides the solution to the mystery. Thipps’s

flat where the body was found is in a building which is situated next to a large hospital and its dissection room. As it becomes clear that the body must have been carried over the roof and then brought through the bathroom window, the surgeon in charge of the dissection room, the famous Sir Julian Freke, catches the interest of Lord Peter.

Wimsey solves the case. He discovers that the body in the bath is a vagrant who had died in one of the workhouses after an accident, and had been brought to the hospital for dissection purposes. Freke has murdered Levy and substituted his body for the other body which was meant for dissection by the medical students.

Reynolds is of the opinion that *Whose Body?* is the most gruesome of all Sayers' novels. In addition to the details about what was done in the dissection room, there is also a description of the scene where Sir Reuben in his dissected state is exhumed for identification by his widow. Reynolds suggests that Sayers "wanted to make it clear from the outset that, though a woman, she intended no simpering evasion of reality" (178).

Sayers started writing *Whose Body?* in 1921 when Britain still suffered from the aftermath of the Great War. Halfway through the novel the readers are confronted with a surprising example of this. Lord Peter is busy collecting clues and is well on his way to begin to understand what has happened. We have heard about the impressive Sir Julian Freke from various angles, as the brilliant scientist and surgeon, as the author of a new book about the physiological basis of the conscience, as the old acquaintance of Wimsey's mother, and somewhat unexpectedly, as the young rejected suitor of the girl who instead eloped with and married Reuben Levy.

Wimsey is sitting late at night by himself thinking and reasoning, feeling that the solution is in his subconscious, only he is unable to reach it. Sitting there reading Freke's book about conscience, the solution suddenly strikes him. To illustrate this

Sayers employs the example of the game where one is supposed to make a word of a jumble of letters, in this case COSSSSRI. Instead of slowly trying to arrange the letters in various ways, one stares at the letters, and suddenly “the combination SCISSORS presents itself with calm certainty” (122).

All of a sudden Wimsey knew how things had been done, and that Sir Julian was the villain. And then, to the reader’s surprise, Lord Peter Wimsey goes all to pieces, wakes up Bunter and babbles about water, guns and trenches. “No, no, it’s all right, Major – don’t you worry” (122), said the faithful servant, and after having put Wimsey to bed, Sergeant Bunter said to himself: “thought we’d had the last of these attacks” (125). The next morning the Duchess turns up and takes her son with her to Denver for the weekend. But not before he, via Inspector Parker, has started to wind up the case.

Sayers brings up themes from the war in most of her novels, and in her last Wimsey book, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, she returns to his shell shock. The Duchess tells his wife Harriet about Bunter and Wimsey having been in the same unit during the war and how Bunter had saved Wimsey from being buried after an attack by the Germans. It was also Bunter, entering Lord Peter’s service after the war, who was the person mainly responsible for getting Wimsey back on his feet. In commenting on Wimsey’s war record, Robert Kuhn McGregor argues that this was one of the reasons why Lord Peter became so popular with a large part of the detective-reading public in Britain: “By placing him in the frontlines as a major who actually suffered shell shock, Sayers preserved the credibility of his lordly upbringing and education while giving him a real experience of horror shared by millions” (28).

Science was playing an increasingly important role in society in Britain. In Sir Julian Freke, Sayers has created the famous scientist who uses his brilliance to help mankind, but also to ruthlessly take care of his own interests. There are several clues to

his character (apart from the name!). When he discusses his work with Parker, he says that dissection is the basis of all good theory and all correct diagnosis. This may not be very controversial, but he continues: "One must keep one's hand and eye in training. This place is far more important to me than Harley Street, and some day I shall abandon my consulting practice altogether, and settle down here to cut up my subjects and write my books in peace. So many things in this life is a waste of time, Mr. Parker" (*Body* 100). He believes that all mental disturbances are due to damaged brain cells, in other words a perfect example of biological determinism. Conscience is, the way Freke sees it, an unnecessary hindrance in doing what you want.

In Sir Julian's confession letter to Wimsey the reader gets a deeper understanding of the famous scientist's mind and how it works. Ever since Levy married the girl Freke wanted, he has waited for the right moment to get his revenge. The way he sees it, the only difficulty in a murder is the disposal of the body. That is why he constructed the plan of substituting one body for the other. He killed Levy with a poker from behind, and inflicted on him a similar injury to that of the pauper, breaking the fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae. "It was delicate work calculating the exact force necessary to kill him without breaking the skin, but my professional experience was useful to me" (176).

Freke had in fact not had any special thoughts about where to dispose of the body of the pauper, but he gets the bright idea of leaving it with Thipps, "I remembered his silly face, and his silly chatter about vivisection. It occurred to me pleasantly how delightful it would be to deposit my parcel with him and see what he made of it" (181).

Then the letter continues with the description of the dissection of Sir Julian, "I took off Levy's head and started to open up the face. In twenty minutes his own wife would not have recognised him" (182). All this was done during the night and early

morning before anybody else came to the dissection room. The body lying there waiting for further dissection by the medical students was still supposed to be the pauper that was brought in the day before. In their work with the mystery Wimsey and Parker struck up an acquaintance with Piggott, one of the medical students who had been in the dissection room the day in question. They get him to describe the work they had been doing that day, “I’d asked for an arm specially because I was rather weak in arms, and Watts – that’s the attendant – had promised to save me one”(143). When Wimsey asks if he had seen the head, he says no, because “old Freke bagged the head himself” (142). On Wimsey’s question about what Freke did to the head he says that “he called us up and gave us a jaw on spinal haemorrhage and nervous lesions” (142). There are certainly similarities between Freke and Frankenstein!

In his confession letter Freke says that he is going to die by his own hand. He asks Wimsey to see to it that his body is given to his hospital for dissection, “I feel sure that my brain will be of interest to the scientific world” (183). As it happens he is caught just before he is able to carry out his intention, and Wimsey muses: “all that coolness, all those brains – and then he couldn’t resist writing to show how clever he was, even to keep his head out of the noose” (183).

Sir Julian Freke is the brilliant researcher who thinks he can manage everything by his intellect. Ironically, what becomes his fate is that he can never forget being humiliated as a young man. “Sex is every man’s loco spot” observes Wimsey (148), bringing in a bit of Freud. Kuhn McGregor discusses Sayers’ use of science as a theme in *Whose Body?* and later novels. He argues that her message is that science has resulted in great accomplishments, but one has to watch out for scientists (32). This point seems to especially concern medical scientists, which she also brings into her later novel *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*.

Dorothy Sayers has by some critics been accused of anti-Semitism. There certainly are numerous places in *Whose Body?* where the focus is on Jews. The first time is when Parker tells Wimsey about the disappearance of Levy, “I went round to see if the Semitic-looking stranger in Mr. Thipps’s bath was by any extraordinary chance Sir Robert Levy” (21). The reader learns later that Freke had indeed been looking for a body which resembled Levy, in order to carry out his plan about substituting the body in the dissection room for Sir Julian. Later Wimsey says that “You shall see my body to-night, Parker, and I’ll look for your wandering Jew to-morrow” (34). When the Duchess tells Wimsey the story about how Mrs. Levy’s parents had objected to her marrying a Jew, she continues in her rambling manner:

I’m sure some Jews are very good people, and personally I’d much rather they believed something, though of course it must be very inconvenient, what with not working on Saturdays and circumcising the poor little babies, and everything depending on the new moon and that funny kind of meat they have with such a slang-sounding name, and never being able to have bacon for breakfast. (41)

And when Bunter is trying to get some information about Levy from his servants one of them says:

I don’t hold with Hebrews as a rule, Mr. Bunter, and of course I understand that you may find it to your advantage to be in a titled family, but there’s less thought of that these days, and I will say, for a self-made man, no one could call Sir Reuben vulgar. (47)

And Bunter assents: “A good Jew can be a good man, that’s what I’ve always said” (47). Parker and Wimsey talk about Freke and his thirst for revenge, “It isn’t the girl Freke would bother about - it’s having his aristocratic nose put out of joint by a little Jewish nobody” (148). The medical students refer to the body in the dissecting room as “the old Sheeny” (142). Incidentally, since they did not see the head they were probably

thinking of the circumcision. And Freke is saying the following in his confession letter when telling about the meeting with Levy and the possibility of buying some stocks, “And he shrugged up his shoulders and looked like a pawnbroker” (173).

Sayers’ authorized biographer, James Brabazon, goes to considerable length in describing her feelings about Jews, maintaining that she was consciously anti-Semitic (216-219). Carolyn Heilbrun criticises Brabazon for his “complete acceptance” of this in her essay “Dorothy L. Sayers: Biography Between the Lines.” She suggests that “Sayers, in fact, disliked the Jewish religion because of its refusal to recognize Jesus as the saviour” (11). Sayers herself was, according to Kuhn McGregor, surprised at being accused of anti-Semitism. In commenting on all the Jewish stereotyping found in the novel, he notes that everyone in the novel accepts it without thought or comment: “Even a woman as educated and sensitive to the human condition as Dorothy L. Sayers could include it in a novel as natural and innocuous behaviour [...] Unconscious anti-Semitism was a part of life, a condition of mind, an expression of the culture” (31).

Colin Watson observes that the British public at the time was “generally unaware of the ugliness of ethnic intolerance” (124). He comments on Sidney Horler, another author of crime fiction, who was “only one of several popular authors of the period who put anti-Semitic sentiments into print, and there is nothing to suggest that their assumption of the approval of their readers was misplaced. The Jew was, without question, the favourite of British middle class scorn” (135). One may conclude that the cited examples in *Whose Body?*, which to the reader of today certainly seem anti-Semitic, may have been less so to Sayers’ contemporary audience.

In England in the early 1920s class ideology was still a question of everybody “adhering to the position in which it had pleased God to place one,” as Carolyn Heilbrun puts it in her book *Hamlet’s Mother and Other Women* (240). Social

hierarchy, although slowly disappearing, was still present, and in *Whose Body?* there are numerous examples of its existence. The unfortunate Mr. Thipps, in whose bath the body was found, is constantly referred to as “little” by Lord Peter and his mother the Duchess, “little Mr. Thipps,” “the little architect man,” “poor little man,” “a nice little man,” “poor little beast” (8-9), “his weak little eye-lids” (11). Thipps is apparently not a tall man, but this constant referral to him as “little” may easily be seen as indicating his status as much as his size. This is confirmed by quoting his frequent “reely.” Both Thipps and his deaf mother, who by the way is a delightful character, are also dropping their h’s, which adds to the picture of class differences. When the Duchess whispers comments to Parker during the inquest, she says this about the jury, “and what unfinished-looking faces they have – so characteristic, I always think, of the lower middle-class” (85), which was probably not a shocking utterance from a representative of the aristocracy at the time.

Employing servants was still the rule among both the upper and middle class. When Wimsey arrives at Denver Castle in the middle of the night with Mrs. Thipps, and tells his mother that he has to leave after a couple of hours sleep and she says “I’ll send up your breakfast at half past six, dear” (42), there is no doubt that this will be done by the servants, she does not even question the possibility of this not being done.

What about Bunter? Watson in his book *Snobbery with Violence* somewhat acidly states that:

The most famous servant created by any detection writer is Bunter, Lord Peter Wimsey’s man – if man, indeed, is the word for a being who epitomized everything Dorothy Sayers considered desirable in a director of wordly affairs. (146)

And he continues: “He is a sort of a priest, charged with the maintenance of ritual and ornament which reflect the immutability of the social structure” (146). Watson, who considers Sayers snobbish, nevertheless argues that “her phrasing of many of the Wimsey and Bunter passages shows that she enjoyed writing them and intended them to entertain” (148).

Bunter, who has been asked by Wimsey to get friendly with Freke’s servants in order to find out what happened during the night when the body was found, writes a letter to Wimsey at Denver, and in the middle of reporting what he got out of Cummings, Freke’s valet, he puts in the following:

May I take this opportunity of expressing my grateful appreciation of your lordship’s excellent taste in food, drink and dress? It is, if I may say so, more than a pleasure – it is an education, to valet and buttle your lordship. (130)

It is very likely that passages like these are what Watson has in mind when he talks about “the pomposities of a late Victorian butler,” which Sayers lets Bunter utter.

Watson also argues that these pomposities were “innocent of social criticism” (148).

That there also was hierarchy among servants is shown through Bunter when he comments on Cummings’ taste in music and drink, “I may say that his views on women and the stage were such as I should have expected from a man who would smoke with your lordship’s port” (130).

In *Whose Body?* Bunter seems to be a man with no life outside his job at 110A Piccadilly. But in Sayers’ next book, *Clouds of Witness*, both Lord Peter and the readers are taken by surprise. Wimsey and Bunter are talking:

‘Yes, my lord. My old mother – ‘ ‘Your old mother, Bunter? I didn’t know you had one. I always imagined you were turned out ready-made so to speak. ‘Scuse me. Infernally rude of me. Beg your pardon, I’m sure.’ ‘Not at all, my lord. My

mother lives in Kent, my lord, near Maidstone. Seventy-five, my lord, and an extremely active woman for her years, if you'll excuse my mentioning it. I was one of seven.' (82)

Bunter has been in Wimsey's service at least five years, and it seems nearly incredible that his employer has known nothing about Bunter's relatives, in spite of the existing inequality. Wimsey now, however, "stretched out his hand impulsively, but Mr. Bunter was too well trained to see it" (83). Bunter knows his place.

Inspector Parker, who has "a modest, though sufficient, salary drawn from the pockets of the British tax-payer," has no living-in servant, but a woman "who did for him by the day," (*Body* 62), and his breakfast is slightly less luxurious than the one he sometimes gets at Lord Peter's, seeming often to consist of burnt porridge. His modest bachelor flat has, in the style of many London flats, a combined bathroom and kitchen. In other words, Parker's life-style is very much simpler than Lord Peter's, a life similar to Sayers herself at the time. He is a contrast to Lord Peter's seemingly irresponsible way of life, and in fact Parker once tells his friend that "you'll never become a professional till you learn to do a little work, Wimsey" (53).

According to Dawson Gaillard, *Whose Body?* was called "the maddest, jolliest crime story of recent memory" by *The Nation* when it was published (29). Looking back in 1937 on her detective novels, Sayers in her essay "Gaudy Night" repeats what she had said at the start of her career about wanting to produce something less like a conventional detective story, and more like a novel. But when she now had re-read *Whose Body?* she felt that "it is conventional to the last degree [...] because one cannot write a novel unless one has something to say about life, and I had nothing to say about it, because I knew nothing" (208). This may seem too self-critical. The novel is a conventional puzzle, but with sustained suspense and intriguing plot devices,

challenging the reader. *Whose Body?* contains tedious passages and lengthy speculations, such as Wimsey describing Hypotheses A, B, C, D, or E to Parker. But they are not many, the style of the larger part of the novel is entertaining and witty with a lively dialogue.

Sayers may have overdone the Bertram Woosterism of Lord Peter Wimsey. But there are several signs of a more rounded character, which will be more developed in later novels, making Lord Peter more “human.” There are secondary characters, like that of Lord Peter’s mother, the Duchess, who are better developed. Her rambling monologues are a stream-of-consciousness parody. The readers also get a fair understanding of several of the other supporting characters, among them Thipps with his unfortunate nightclub experience, the medical student Piggott, and of course Freke, the villain.

Although the main reason why Dorothy Sayers started writing detective fiction was that she hoped to make some money, this first novel is an entertaining puzzle with good attempts at characterization. The novel gives an interesting picture of “manners and morals” in England at the time which will be further developed in her later novels.

Chapter 2. *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club.*

The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club is the fourth book in the Wimsey series, published in 1928. In addition to Lord Peter Wimsey, the only other characters from *Whose Body?* are Bunter and Inspector Parker. The family solicitor Murbles plays an important role. Most other characters have directly or indirectly something to do with the Bellona Club, which is a club for war veterans in the centre of London. Apart from the detective plot the main theme centres around the characters' reactions and behaviour in relation to the Great War.

Ninety-year old General Fentiman is found dead in his armchair in the Club on Armistice Day, presumably because of a heart attack. Judging from the state of the *rigor mortis* he has been dead for several hours, but nobody has noticed, the club members are used to see him sitting there. Because inheritance is an issue, the question of establishing the time of death becomes important. The brothers George and Robert Fentiman, both war veterans and grandsons of the deceased, will inherit quite a large sum of money if the General dies after his sister Felicity. As it happens, Felicity dies that same morning. Lord Peter Wimsey is asked by Murbles, the Fentiman's family solicitor, to try to investigate this. Wimsey discovers that it is a case of murder. General Fentiman has died because of a strong dose of digitalin, and the investigation centers round the time of death in addition to disclosing the murderer. General Fentiman had in fact died the night before, but his grandson Robert, who did not know that he was poisoned, had tampered with the body to make it look as if he had died that same morning. He put the body in the telephone cabinet near the library overnight, and during the two minutes' Armistice silence, when everybody was either out in the street or standing on the balcony, he carried him over to his chair and put a newspaper in his

hands. It turns out that the murderer is Doctor Penberthy, who besides being the Club doctor, has a practice in Harley Street. He is interested in “glands” and wants to open a clinic. Only he needs money, and is secretly engaged to Ann Dorland, who is Felicity’s ward and heiress.

The special atmosphere at the Bellona Club is conveyed during the first few pages of the novel. Wimsey meets Captain George Fentiman, who asks him what he is doing in this “morgue.” He says that the place reminds him of a cartoon in *Punch*: “Waiter, take away Lord Whatsisname, he’s been dead two days.” He goes on to comment on his grandfather who comes in every morning and “becomes part of the furniture till the evening.” And he adds: “I wish to God Jerry had put me out with the rest of ‘em. What’s the good of coming through for this sort of thing?” (1). And Wimsey seems to sympathize to a certain extent, saying that “all this remembrance-day business gets on your nerves, don’t it?” (1).

The readers understand that George Fentiman is somewhat mentally unstable due to war experiences, and the scene is set for the discovery of the dead body. George is very bitter: “A man goes and fights for his country, gets his inside gassed out, and loses his job, and all they give him is the privilege of marching past the Cenotaph once a year and paying four shillings in the pound income tax” (2). Fentiman’s voice rises during these complaints and “A shocked veteran, till then invisible in a neighbouring armchair, poked out a lean head like a tortoise and said ‘Sh’ viperishly” (2). Sayers’ balance between the serious and the witty is here well exemplified.

While Wimsey and George are still talking, the discovery of the dead general is made by another member who goes over to say hello. When George Fentiman realizes that his grandfather has been sitting dead in his chair without him or anybody else noticing, he loses all control:

Fentiman laughed. Peal after hysterical peal shook his throat. All round the room scandalised Bellonians creaked to their gouty feet, shocked by the unmannerly noise. 'Take him away!' said Fentiman, 'take him away. He's been dead two days! So are you! So am I! We're all dead, and we never noticed it!' (5)

The reactions to the "unpleasantness" among the members in the club may be seen as an illustration of the generation gap. In Gaillard's opinion the description of the older club members' reaction to the General's death satirizes a post-war society that bows to their dead traditions, an example of Sayers' wish to combine manners and mystery (55).

Many of the members were veterans from the Boer War, some, like General Fentiman, even from the Crimean. As the narrator observes:

It is doubtful which occurrence was more disagreeable to the senior members of the Bellona Club – the grotesque death of General Fentiman in their midst or the indecent neurasthenia of his grandson. Only the younger men felt no sense of outrage, they knew too much. (*Bellona* 6)

The above passage, according to Terrance Lewis, is an example of "us versus them," "showing that those who had fought in the front lines during the war would always look at life differently" (2). This "*versus* habit," as Paul Fussell calls it in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory* (79), can also be applied to show the dichotomy between those who fought in the war and those who stayed at home.

The First World War, or The Great War as it is often called, was a war with tremendous violence and human suffering. Huge advances in military technology transformed the battlefield, and the conditions for the men in the trenches were horrendous. Three quarters of a million men from the United Kingdom were killed. And according to A. J. P. Taylor, "as a further scar, the war left one million and a half men who were permanently weakened by wounds or the effect of gas" (120).

Captain George Fentiman in *Bellona Club* is a prime example of a man with war injuries. The reader gets a thorough insight into his problems when Wimsey visits him and his wife Sheila. The Fentimans rent a two room flat, sharing kitchen and bathroom with other tenants. Not long after Wimsey has arrived things start to get unpleasant. The embittered George takes every opportunity to complain about things. Sheila, although pretty, has “an appearance of worry and ill-health” (64). Although she is working and he is at home and out-of work, George keeps accusing Sheila of not having done this and that in the home. When she asks him why he has not spoken to the charlady about the coal, commenting that she herself has usually gone by the time the woman comes in, George immediately jumps at her, “Oh, yes I know. You needn’t keep on rubbing it in about your having to go out to work” (65). A similar pattern is seen every time the conversation turns in the direction of the couple’s life situation. In addition to being unemployed, George Fentiman has trouble with his “gassed-out” stomach, and his nerves are on edge. Several critics have pointed out that in describing this too common situation in England at the time, Sayers also drew on her own experience, having married a man with similar problems.

The Fentimans’ money worries are more serious than just the problem of living on a meagre salary. Sheila had originally tried to start a teashop and to be able to do this they had borrowed money from a “loan-shark.” The teashop was no success and they are now in considerable debt to this man. Terrance Lewis observes that this particular problem is typical of what at the time was known as the Slump (37).

Captain George Fentiman is one of the “damaged” men from the war, and as Samuel Hynes says in *A War Imagined*, “ex-soldiers figure prominently in post-war fiction.” But according to Hynes, the damaged ones are found in more serious novels, while in “popular novels they appear as soldier-heroes” (356). Considering that

detective novels are regarded as belonging to popular fiction, George Fentiman is certainly an exception to this rule. The extent of his damage is becoming still more evident at the end of the novel when he disappears from home following the disclosing of his grandfather's murder. Formerly he has had frequent fits of odd behaviour which have "generally ended in his going off and wandering about in a distraught manner for several days, sometimes with partial and occasionally with complete temporary loss of memory" (*Bellona* 203). When he is found he is suffering from the delusion that he has killed his grandfather. As the police surgeon observes, "A hundred years ago they'd have called it diabolic possession, but *we* know better" (256).

Major Robert Fentiman, George's elder brother, does not appear to suffer from any war injuries. His brother says that "he's so thick-skinned; the regular unimaginative Briton. I believe Robert would cheerfully go through another five years of war and think it all a very good rag" (99). The way he behaves after having found his grandfather dead the night before, and realizing that he might lose his inheritance, certainly fits with the above description. By concealing the dead body of General Fentiman in the telephone cabinet overnight, and then transferring him to his usual armchair during the two minutes' silence the next morning, he hopes to make it look as if the General has recently died. Robert's reactions when he is told by Murbles and Wimsey that they know, further heightens the impression given:

Fentiman flung himself into a chair, slapping his thigh and roaring with laughter. 'I might have known you'd be on to it,' he gasped; 'but it was a damn' good joke, wasn't it? Good lord! I couldn't help chuckling to myself, you know. To think of all those refrigerated old imbeciles at the Club sittin' solemnly round there, and comin' in and noddin' to the old Guv'nor like so many mandarins, when he was as dead as a door-nail all the time. That leg of his was a bit of a slip-up, of course, but that was an accident.' (149).

“That leg” refers to the fact that he had had to forcibly bend the knee to get the body out of the cabinet after the *rigor mortis* had set in. This is also one of the reasons why Wimsey realizes that the body had been tampered with after the time of death.

Whether Robert’s lack of finer feelings is a reaction to his war experiences is not quite clear. He is earlier referred to as “a regular army type,” being “of the old Fentiman stock” (14). Kuhn McGregor, however, has no doubts that Robert “came away from the war a damaged soul. His sense of gentlemanly honor was gone.” To him both brothers are examples of “men desperately wounded deep in their emotions” (71). Terrance Lewis does not argue the point about Robert’s war damage as strongly, but observes that “many of those qualities which made Robert such an excellent officer in time of war were not suited for peacetime Britain” (2).

There are several examples of what may be called a clash between generations in post-war Britain in the novel. When Murbles is told by Wimsey that the body was put in the armchair during the two minutes’ silence he is horror-struck: “God bless my soul! How abominable! How – how blasphemous. Really I cannot find words. This is the most disgraceful thing I ever heard of ” (*Bellona* 133). And later, after having listened to Robert telling about his handling of the body, he gives him directly his opinion “in an awful voice: [...] ‘having employed those sacred moments when every thought should have been consecrated - . ‘Oh, punk!’ interrupted Robert rudely. ‘My old pals are none the worse because I did a little bit of self-help’[...]” (151).

Another, though less brutal, example of the clash of generations is when George talks to Wimsey about his grandfather:

The old man – damn it all, I know he was in the Crimea, but he’s no idea what a real war’s like. He thinks things can go on just as they did half a century ago. I dare say he never did behave as I do. Anyway, I know he never had to go to his wife for pocket-money, let alone having the inside gassed out of him. Coming

preaching to me – and I couldn't say anything, because he was so confoundedly old, you know. (98)

Wimsey understands how George feels, and he seems to be of the same opinion as most of the other war veterans as regards Armistice Day: "it's my belief most of us would only be too pleased to chuck these community hysterics if the beastly newspapers didn't run it for all it's worth. However, it don't do to say so" (1). And "it don't do to say so" because he knows that to the general public the day is important. When he learns that the club doorman had not been on duty that morning because he was given permission to attend the ceremony, he graciously agrees: "Naturally, you would be there [...] it wouldn't have done to miss the Cenotaph" (27). On the other hand he deems it necessary, when kind old Murbles says that George Fentiman has inherited "a weakly strain," to politely defend him, because he "knew better than the old solicitor the kind of mental and physical strain George Fentiman had undergone. [...] 'And then he was gassed and all that, you know,' he added apologetically" (14).

One may wonder whether the reason Wimsey feels he has to apologize for George's condition also has to do with his own nervous troubles. However, in *Bellona Club* Wimsey does not have any breakdown as opposed to the one in *Whose Body?*. The only time his shell-shock is touched upon is when he speaks to Ann Dorland trying to console her. He tells her of his time in a nursing home right after the war, when he played Patience the whole time to keep his mind off other things (237).

The relationship between the sexes changed after the war. Women had got used to working outside the home, and many of them were reluctant to go back to domestic service. Many men had difficulties accepting this. George Fentiman is one of them: "No wonder a man can't get a decent job these days, with these hard-mouthed, cigarette-

smoking females all over the place, pretending they're geniuses and business women and all the rest of it" (71). He even scorns poor Ann Dorland because she in addition to being a companion has taken up painting, "Why couldn't she be a companion? In the old days heaps of unmarried women were companions " (71). George resents the new situation, and he blames the women for his own unemployment. He keeps nagging his wife because she is the one who supports the family. As a matter of fact Sheila is not a career woman, in an unfortunate moment she admits that she does not *want* to go out to work. This of course does not improve George's mood. The Fentimans are one of many married couples after the war in a similar position, the husband being unable to work due to physical or mental disability. Sayers deals more with the "problem" of the unmarried women after the war in some of her other novels. This will be discussed in a later chapter.

Much of what is described in *Bellona Club* does not have any direct connection with the puzzle, but one important clue to the solution of the crime, nicely woven into the story, is the missing poppy on General Fentiman's clothes. This makes Wimsey understand that the General could not have come in that same morning, as it would have been unthinkable for a man like the General not to wear his poppy on Remembrance Sunday. Together with the point about the exact time when the body was put in the armchair, the rituals and "manners" around this particular Day plays an important role in the novel.

Concerning the crime plot itself there are quite a few similarities to *Whose Body?*. In *Bellona Club* the murderer is also a medical man. Doctor Penberthy is not too well off. He has been an army surgeon and is now sharing a practice with two other doctors in Harley Street in addition to attending to the veterans in the Bellona Club. He wants to engage himself in research on glands. Ductless glands is "ever so much more

up-to-date than vitamins,” as Wimsey’s friend Marjorie writes to him in a letter (141). At the fashionable party where Penberthy is giving a talk on glands, the reader is presented with various characters’ opinion about glandular theory. Penberthy wants to establish a clinic “to make everybody good by glands,” as the hostess puts it (168). Penberthy himself, talking to Wimsey, believes that “it’s the Science of the future, as they say in the press. There really isn’t any doubt about that. It puts biology in quite a new light” (171). Had it not been for the exhumation of General Fentiman, he might have succeeded. Penberthy, just as ambitious as Freke in *Whose Body*, is not, however, as callous. When Wimsey makes it clear that he knows everything, and suggests that Penberthy write a confession to clear Ann Dorland of suspicion, he agrees. “And then?” he asks. “Then do as you like. In your place I know what I should do,” answers Wimsey (260). And Penberthy commits suicide by shooting himself in the Club library with a gun supplied by old Colonel Marchbanks, one of the members. One more “unpleasantness” has occurred at the Bellona Club.

Comparing *Whose Body?* and *Bellona Club* Kuhn McGregor repeats his opinion of Sayers being concerned with “the dangers of unregulated science [...] If nerves and glands were news, the public needed to be wary” (74). Incidentally, McGregor as well as other critics draw attention to Sayers’ own unfortunate experiences with doctors when she was an adolescent, suggesting that her creation of villains belonging to the medical profession may be looked upon as a form of revenge for her sufferings then. While such a possibility can not be completely rejected, it seems a minor reason. Sayers must be credited for having written about scientific themes that were in the news at the time, and which the public took a great interest in.

At the same time this part may also be seen as a satire on modern biology. The passages describing the exhumation scene, similar to the one in *Whose Body?*, have

aspects of comedy of manners. Arriving at the cemetery Wimsey asks Murbles, “When does the ceremony take place? Quietly, I take it? No flowers?” (140). Comparing exhumations to funerals, the narrator observes:

However depressing the thud of earth on the coffin-lid may be, it is music compared to the rattle of gravel and thump of spades which herald a premature and unreverend resurrection, enveloped in clouds of formalin and without benefit of clergy. (141)

The description of the autopsy continues in the same vein:

‘D’you mind holding while I get this ligature on? Ta.’ (Snip, snip.) ‘The jars are just behind you. Thanks. Look out! You’ll have it over. Ha! ha! that was a near thing [...] better have a look at the brain while we’re about it, I suppose. Have you got the large saw?’ (143)

Murbles finds “the medical men” callous, while Wimsey comments that this is a job they do several times a week.

The Wimsey character in *Bellona Club* is still at times portrayed as a Wooster type, in fact he once says to George Fentiman that people think he is “too well-off to have any brains” (3). He still utters sentences like “*au contraire*, as the man said in the Bay of Biscay when they asked if he’d dined” (37) and when Bunter asks him whether the new case is promising he answers that “it has its points. So has a porcupine [...] Be at great pains, Bunter, to cultivate a detached look at life. Take example by the bloodhound, who will follow up with equal and impartial zest the trail of a parricide or of a bottle of aniseed” (23). Bunter of course says that he will bear it in mind. At other times Wimsey is the superdetective, as when he discusses the state of *rigor mortis* with Dr. Penberthy and “suddenly turning and looking the other straight in the face. The change in him was almost startling – it was as if a steel blade had whipped suddenly out of its velvet scabbard” (32). The reader is left in no uncertainty about Wimsey’s

qualities! Neither is Marjorie Phelps: “Peter Wimsey! You sit there, looking a perfectly well-bred imbecile, and then in the most underhand way you twist people into doing things they ought to blush for. No wonder you detect things” (178).

Bunter and Parker are given less space in this novel than in *Whose Body?* But the pattern with Wimsey and Bunter is the same, changing between dialogue and Bunter’s assistance, in this case photography inside the Bellona Club. Parker comes into the case fairly late, Wimsey does most of the detecting, and in fact the two have a couple of serious rows concerning how to interpret some of the evidence. Though an unpleasant experience, it may also be regarded as a deepened relationship between the two. The quarrels have to do with the suspects, especially the Fentiman brothers and Ann Dorland. When it comes to Dorland, everybody at one time seems to believe her guilty except Wimsey, and he shows considerable psychological insight in his handling of her. This human touch is also much in evidence in the way he supports Sheila in her difficulties with her husband. The Lord Peter character seems to have taken on new dimensions.

From 1928-1931 a lot of war literature was published in England. Sayers’ *Bellona Club* was in fact one of the first that treated the effects of the war, and Lewis argues that the war themes “fit right in with what the audience wanted” (115). He is of the opinion that her novel “in many ways shows the attitudes of the British Society towards the war better than the famous books about the War which were just being published in 1928” (3). Also Valerie Pitt is of a similar opinion: “*The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* [...] assumes as axiomatic the unrecognized conflict between those who were there and those who were not” (107).

Sayers' fourth novel is a mixture of the witty and the serious, it balances between a puzzle and a novel with some real characters and a recognizable society for the readers at the time, a society where the War had left its impact.

Chapter 3. *Unnatural Death, Strong Poison* and Miss Climpson

The status and role of women changed after the Great War. In theory most professions were open to women, the war had changed all that. The labour shortage had increased as the war went on, and women had partly filled the gap. They did office work, the female shorthand-typist took the place of the male clerk, women worked as conductors on buses, on the land and in munitions factories. Many of the returned men must have got a shock when they saw the “new” women, who smoked in public, had their hair cut and were wearing short dresses whose loose style was a complete change from the pre-war fashion which favoured the hour-glass figure. When the war was over, many of the women had no wish to return to the home to give room for the demobilized soldiers, they had got used to a different life. There was, however, an excess of women in society. According to Taylor this excess was at its height in 1921, one and three quarter million (166). Although most demobilized young women “turned to the obvious profession of marriage,” as Robert Graves puts it, there was the problem of “the surplus women” (45). Unemployment, which did not exist during the war, steadily increased in the years after the war. Taylor observes that it was over two million in June 1921, and although it fell again, it was never under one million between the wars (145). Among the many people who struggled with unemployment at the beginning of the twenties was also Dorothy Sayers.

Sayers was not a supporter of “aggressive feminism” as she calls it in a talk she gave in 1938, with the title “Are Women Human?”. She argues polemically against popular slogans like “a woman is as good as a man” and “woman’s place is the home,” and speaks instead of the right of every human being to be looked upon as an individual: “what is unreasonable and irritating is to assume that *all* one’s tastes and

preferences have to be conditioned by the class to which one belongs” (107). Women, as human beings, want an “interesting occupation, reasonable freedom for their pleasures and a sufficient emotional outlet,” she argues (114). She wants women to be accepted as human beings, belonging neither to an inferior nor a superior class.

In *Whose Body?* most of the supporting characters were men, this was according to the tradition of the genre. But as Sayers continued writing there is an increase in female characters in her novels. One of these is the colourful Miss Katherine Alexandra Climpson, who has a prominent position in *Unnatural Death* (1927) and even more so in *Strong Poison* (1930).

Miss Climpson is introduced in a rather unusual and entertaining way in *Unnatural Death*. Wimsey and Parker are investigating a case of unexpected death in an elderly woman, and one day Wimsey asks Parker to come with him to visit a friend. He adds that Parker will be the first person he takes to see “her.” “She’s quite comfortably fixed in a little flat in Pimlico,” he says (25), and on their way there Wimsey continues talking about the “arrangement,” which apparently has lasted about six months, in a way which makes Parker (and the reader) certain about what type of set-up this is. Parker feels quite uncomfortable, as Wimsey and Parker do not usually talk about intimate personal things. However, the door is opened by

a thin middle-aged, woman, with a sharp, sallow face and very vivacious manner. She wore a neat, dark coat and skirt, a high-necked blouse and a long gold neck-chain with a variety of small ornaments dangling from it at intervals, and her iron-grey hair was dressed under a net, in the style fashionable in the reign of the late King Edward. (26)

Seeing Wimsey she exclaims, “Oh, Lord Peter! How *very* nice to see you. Rather an *early* visit, but I’m sure you will excuse the sitting-room being a trifle in disorder. *Do* come in. The lists are *quite* ready for you. I finished them last night” (26). As a matter

of fact the room was very tidy except for a cup, an eggshell and a plate with some crumbs. The bewildered Parker is told after he and Wimsey have left that Miss Climpson is employed by Wimsey. The “lists” she is referring to have to do with the work she is generally doing for him, investigating newspaper advertisements, searching for attempted frauds and suspicious offers with the intention of taking advantage of women and the poor. Wimsey calls this his private pogrom and his

-Insurance against the Socialist Revolution – when it comes. ‘What did you do with your great wealth, comrade?’ ‘I bought First Editions.’ ‘Aristocrat! À la lanterne!’ ‘Stay, spare me! I took proceedings against 500 moneylenders who oppressed the workers.’ ‘Citizen, you have done well. We will spare your life. You shall be promoted to clean out the sewers.’ (30)

In addition to the advertisement work Miss Climpson assists him in his other investigations. As he observes, she can make inquiries where a man would be out of place asking questions, “I send a lady with a long woolly jumper on knitting needles and jingly things round her neck. Of course she asks questions – everyone expects it. Nobody is surprised. Nobody is alarmed. And so-called superfluity is agreeable and usefully disposed of” (30). The “superfluity” that Wimsey is referring to, are the “old maids” who have no other choice than being companions, while their “magnificent gossip-powers” and inquisitiveness could instead be used in investigations where questions have to be asked. As he observes about Miss Climpson, “she asks questions which a young man could not put without a blush” (30).

Miss Climpson’s letters are similar to her oral style, full of underlinings, exclamation marks, and in an epistolary style. According to biographer Barbara Reynolds, this is an imitation of the letters of Sayers’ own Aunt Gertrude. Reynolds also observes that although Miss Climpson is “drawn with humour and affection,”

Sayers did not really like Aunt Gertrude (200). On the other hand she had compassion for her father's unmarried sisters, and in a letter she refers to Aunt Gertrude, who "lived peripatetically as a 'companion' to various old cats, saving halfpence and cadging trifles, aimlessly doing what when done was of little value to God or man. From all such frustrate unhappiness, God keep us!" (201).

Katherine Climpson is an intelligent and resourceful woman. She tells Parker and Wimsey that she would have liked to have a good education, "but my dear father didn't believe in it for women" (*Death* 28). As Kuhn McGregor observes, "Miss Climpson is a definite victim of the prevalent Victorian attitudes toward women [...] condemned to a pointless existence as chaperone, travelling companion and common boarder" (68). In fact, if her father had not had that "attitude," Miss Climpson could have had a university education. The first women's colleges, Newnham College in Cambridge and Sayers' own Somerville in Oxford, were founded in the 1870's. Again it seems likely that Sayers, when creating the Climpson character, had her own unmarried aunts in mind.

However, as an employee of Lord Peter Wimsey's, Miss Climpson's experience from boarding houses comes in handy. In *Unnatural Death* he wants her to go to a small town in Hampshire to make discreet enquiries about the dead woman, posing as a "retired lady in easy circumstances looking for a nice little place to settle down in" (29). Her letters to Wimsey, reporting her findings, give an impression of how the case is progressing as well as a characterization of Miss Climpson:

On the day after my arrival, I informed Mrs. Budge that I was a great sufferer from *rheumatism* (which is quite true, as I have a sad legacy of that kind left me by, alas! my *port-drinking* ancestors!) – and I inquired what *doctors* there were in the neighbourhood [...] I said I should prefer an *elderly* doctor, as *the young men*, in my opinion, were *not to be depended on*. Mrs. Budge heartily agreed with me, and a little discreet questioning brought out the *whole story* of Mrs.

Dawson's illness and the 'carryings-on' (as she termed them) of Dr. Carr and *the nurse!* (32)

Continuing her investigation in a similar manner she makes good progress. Being a devoted Christian, she attends the various functions at the local church, and gets introduced to new useful people. However, occasionally she has trouble with her conscience. Once when she leaves church she finds a piece of paper which appears to be some type of confession. Recognizing a name, she understands that she ought to have a look:

Her natural inquisitiveness said 'Read'; her religious training said, 'You must not read'; her sense of duty to Wimsey, who employed her, said, 'Find out', her own sense of decency said, 'Do no such thing'; a dreadful harsh voice muttered gratingly, 'Murder is the question. Are you going to be the accomplice of Murder?' (169)

In the end of course she gave in to Wimsey's voice, and although the words on the paper made her understand a lot, the result also very nearly made her the last victim of the murderer, or rather the murderess.

For in this novel, where most of the characters are women, the villain is also a woman. *Who* and *why* is evident long before the *how*, which is the great mystery and is not clear until the last few pages. Mary Dawson, who killed her old great-aunt because of money, killed the other two women to cover up, and all died instantly due to an air bubble injected into an artery with a hypodermic needle, making it look like a natural death, a cunning method. Medical opinion given some years later was that a hypodermic syringe most likely was too small to inject sufficient air into an artery to cause death. However, as Julian Symons observes, "The method was at least possible, and it would be ungenerous to demand certainty" (113).

We meet Miss Climpson again in *Strong Poison*. She is on the jury in a trial where a young woman, Harriet Vane, is accused of murdering her lover with arsenic. Miss Climpson is the only one among the jurors who believes the accused innocent. Through endless hours she manages to stick to her conviction. The jury is unable to agree on a verdict as the foreman has to inform the judge, while he “glanced savagely at one corner of the jury-box, where the elderly spinster sat with her head bowed and her hands tightly clasped” (26). The jury is discharged, and the judge orders a new trial in a month. Lord Peter Wimsey has decided he is going to prove Vane’s innocence, he has in fact fallen in love with her while being present at the trial. In other words, Dorothy Sayers thus allows something to happen in *Strong Poison* which she had always warned against in detective fiction, “the love interest.” However, when she wrote this in her well-known “Introduction” to the anthology in 1928, she also wrote: “The instances in which the love-story is an integral part of the plot are extremely rare” (78). Harriet Vane will remain an important person in Wimsey’s life from now on, and it may be argued that most of the time the love-story is an integral part of the plot.

Miss Climpson, no longer a juror, is now free to help Wimsey in his investigations. She has advanced in her professional life since *Unnatural Death*, now being in charge of a “typing-bureau” set up by Wimsey. All the employees are women, “mostly elderly, but a few still young and attractive – and if the private register in the steel safe had been consulted, it would have been seen that all these women were of the class unkindly known as ‘superfluous’ ”(*Poison* 36). Although a few of the women did ordinary typing work, most of them spend their time doing the same kind of work Miss Climpson earlier did alone, answering and following up suspicious advertisements, and occasionally helping Wimsey in his investigations. “His lordship was somewhat reticent

about this venture of his, but occasionally, when closeted with Chief Inspector Parker or other intimate friends, referred to it as ‘My Cattery’ ”(36).

Most often Wimsey will use Miss Climpson herself in his own cases, but in *Strong Poison* Joan Murchison is also doing an important job. Posing as an ordinary typist filling a vacancy, she is sent to a law office to do investigations about some papers. As these papers are in a locked box, she has to learn how to pick a lock. Wimsey takes her to the East End to be taught this by a former safe-breaker, now a preacher in the Salvation Army. Miss Murchison proves herself an extremely resourceful sleuth, and by various maneuvers manages to find the papers without raising any suspicion in the office. Incidentally, the financial scandals that shook Britain in the late twenties are indirectly touched upon when describing Miss Murchison and her findings in the office. Kuhn McGregor sees this as one of many examples of Sayers being “cognizant of the natural situation, drawing on the headlines of her time to provide her novels a sense of immediacy” (82).

Miss Murchison in her search finds a forged will, and then it is up to Miss Climpson to continue the investigation in order to find the real one. This leads her once more to a small town and a boarding house, in Westmoreland this time, posing as nobody but herself, an elderly spinster. The second day after her arrival she sends a long letter to Lord Peter which, as the narrator observes, “furnishes us with a wealth of particulars” (114). Among the “particulars” the reader also gets a further impression of Miss Climpson’s earlier life. She mentions her “dear father, who would never permit a *fire* in the house *before* November the 1st or *after* March 31st, even though the thermometer was at *freezing-point!* ” (115). Miss Climpson is grateful for the changes for unmarried women travelling alone. She goes by train, and arrives late at night at the hotel. Observing that this is no longer difficult for a single woman, she comments:

“because whatever old-fashioned people may say about the greater *decorum* and *modesty* of women in Queen Victoria’s time, those who can remember the old conditions know how *difficult* and *humiliating* they were!” (115). She is also grateful that Lord Peter lets her travel First-class, “after the *uncomfortable* travelling which I had to endure in my days of poverty, I feel that I am almost living in *sinful* luxury!” (115).

Miss Climpson has to look for the will in the house of the old and invalid Mrs. Wrayburn (a woman with a Past!). She is attended to by a nurse-companion, Miss Booth, and by running in and out of shops and tea-shops and drinking numerous cups of coffee, Miss Climpson manages after a couple of days to find the nurse and make her acquaintance. The way Sayers describes this, though witty and entertaining, is nothing compared to what follows when Miss Climpson is visiting Miss Booth in the house. She finds out that the nurse is interested in spiritualism, and “in a single moment of illumination, Miss Climpson saw her plan complete and perfect in every detail” because “if there was one subject in the world about which Miss Climpson might claim to know something, it was spiritualism. It is a flower which flourishes bravely in a boarding house atmosphere” (122). Miss Climpson had picked up quite a few tricks and by claiming that she is a medium, she is invited by Miss Booth to the house for a “sitting.” Equipped with some devices, a metal soap-box fastened to her knee for making cracking noises when necessary, and a wire strapped to her wrist to rock the table, Miss Climpson is prepared for her role as a spiritualist medium. During the next few days she manages to find out about the will, which again brings Wimsey’s investigations a giant step further. Sayers goes to comic extremes in her description of the séances with the two women, and Kuhn McGregor wonders whether “she has an axe to grind and was seizing an opportunity” (96).

Spiritualism had flourished during the Victorian age, both in Britain and on the Continent, but it was on the decline at the beginning of the century. However, during and after the Great War, there was an unprecedented growth of the spiritualist movement. The number of spiritualists in Europe grew both during and after the war, “it was inevitably and inextricably tied up with the need to communicate with the fallen” (Jay Winter 58). One prominent adherent was Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the ultimate rationalist. He had lost close relatives in the war and attended séances to try to communicate with his fallen son. He became a convinced spiritualist, and lectured at home and abroad about his experiences.

In the 1930’s the movement was again on the decline, but when Sayers wrote *Strong Poison* it was still popular. Sayers’ opinion of spiritualism seems clear, she lets Miss Climpson wonder “greatly at the folly and wickedness of mankind” (123). One feels inclined to agree with Kuhn McGregor that Conan Doyle’s activities in the spiritualist movement probably was “more than a little embarrassing,” and that Sayers felt it necessary “to set the mystery-reading public right regarding the paranormal” (96). Winter observes that “some spiritualists were unbalanced; others were charlatans. Most were honest true believers” (55).

Miss Booth belongs to the third group, and Miss Climpson again has trouble with her conscience. She consoles herself, however, in her letter to Lord Peter when she informs him about her success:

Though what excuse I can find in my *conscience* for the *methods* I have used, I *don’t* KNOW! but I believe the Church takes into account the necessity of *deceptions* in certain *professions* such as that of a *police-detective* or a *SPY* in time of *WARFARE*, and I trust that my *subterfuges* may be allowed to come under that *category*. (144)

To ease her conscience, she intends to stay on a few days for some more sittings in order to warn Miss Booth against the other medium who is away at the moment, but who Miss Climpson believes “is *quite* as great a charlatan as I AM !!! – and without my *altruistic* motives !!”(145).

In *Strong Poison* the main work is in fact done by the female sleuths Climpson and Murchison. Lord Peter, apart from frequently visiting the prisoner, spends much of his time thinking and waiting for the result of their investigations. But the final touch is his, to find out how the suspect could have eaten the same meal as the murdered without being poisoned, quite an ingenious set-up incidentally, and then tricking him into confession by making him believe that the Turkish delights he has been stuffing himself with, are covered in white arsenic.

Strong Poison shows that Dorothy Sayers was seriously concerned about the situation of women. Admittedly she does not seem overly sympathetic towards gossip women in boarding-houses. On the other hand, without them Miss Climpson could not have done such excellent work. Thus, they fit nicely into the plot. By the creation of Miss Climpson and the “Cattery,” Sayers emphasizes the potential and talent that women have. She also adds a dimension to the Wimsey character by letting him start and support the “typing-bureau.”

Although Miss Climpson in some respects is a radical character, she is nevertheless a survivor of the Victorian era. Harriet Vane is a thoroughly modern woman, strong and independent. Acquitted of the murder charge, she turns down Lord Peter Wimsey’s proposal. She feels that if she married out of gratitude, which is the only feeling she has for him at the moment, she would lose her self-respect. Having introduced the Harriet Vane character, Sayers will use her to further explore the place and role of women in modern society.

Chapter 5. *Gaudy Night*

After *Strong Poison* Sayers wrote four other detective novels before *Gaudy Night*, which was published in 1935. This is a novel in which Sayers extensively explores the situation of women in society. According to Carolyn G. Hart, “*Gaudy Night* has long been lauded as the first feminist mystery novel”(48). It is Sayers’ most academic novel, and writing about it in her essay “*Gaudy Night*,” she said that she had wanted to write a novel “choosing a plot that should exhibit intellectual integrity as the one great permanent value in an emotionally unstable world” (213).

The setting is a women’s college in Oxford, run by women for women, the fictitious Shrewsbury College. The College is clearly modelled on Sayers’ own college Somerville; she writes about a world she knows well. Almost all the characters in the novel, except Wimsey, are women, and questions regarding the proper role of women in modern society are integral to the whole plot. Indirectly there are also references to the fascist threat, written as it is in the middle of the 1930’s. In addition to the mystery, Sayers finally brings about the coming-together of Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey.

Five years have passed since the two met in *Strong Poison*, and Sayers has in the meantime written three Wimsey novels. In two of them Harriet Vane is not mentioned at all, but in *Have his Carcase* (1932) she figures prominently, actively working with Wimsey to solve the mystery, being the one who accidentally finds the murdered person. She is still burdened by the gratitude she feels she owes him for saving her from being hanged, and as far as accepting his marriage proposal is concerned, she is still unable to commit herself.

In *Gaudy Night* Dorothy Sayers makes Harriet Vane the main detective. The action, and also Wimsey, is primarily seen through her eyes. Wimsey does not, in fact, appear until the last third of the novel, being abroad much of the time, involved in obscure diplomatic missions for the Foreign Office. This plot device of Wimsey's absence also makes it possible for Sayers to fully explore the community of women academics. With a man present this would not have been possible to the extent it is being done.

Harriet Vane, now a successful writer of mysteries, returns to her old college in Oxford for a re-union, a so-called "Gaudy," an annual celebration. She has not been back since graduation:

Could one face it now? What would those women say to her, to Harriet Vane, who had taken her First in English and gone to London to write mystery fiction, to live with a man who was not married to her, and to be tried for his murder amid a roar of notoriety? That was not the kind of career Shrewsbury expected of its old students. (8)

However, she enjoys being back. In fact she gets very nostalgic: "If only one could come back to this quiet place, where only intellectual achievement counted" (21).

Talking to old students brings some surprises and disappointments. There is Mary Stokes, who was a social centre in the old days, and "who took the lead in all the long discussions about love and art, religion and citizenship" (9). Now Harriet realizes that they have nothing to say to each other any longer, she feels that Mary has stagnated mentally. "She's stopped growing, I expect," is the rather brutal comment the otherwise kind and cheerful Dean makes to Harriet, apparently not as surprised as Harriet is about Mary's lack of development (15).

Then there is Phoebe Tucker, a historian who has married an archaeologist. They have successful careers, working together. In Harriet's eyes she is one who has not altered, "in spite of added years and marriage" (18). And there is Catherine Freemantle who had been "very brilliant, very smart, very lively and the outstanding scholar of her year" (48). Now Mrs. Bendick, she looks twice her age. She has married a farmer, and most of her married life has been a constant economic struggle. "Harriet had read and heard enough about agricultural depression to know that the story was a common one enough"(48). Sayers here makes one of her rare comments on life in England outside the urban areas.

The conversation between the two women develops into a discussion about work. Harriet thinks Mrs. Bendick is wasting her talents doing manual work that "any uneducated country girl" (48) could have done much better, while Bendick thinks that serving the land, though harsh and austere, is "a finer thing than spinning words on paper" (48). Though admitting that she feels nostalgic coming to Oxford for the Gaudy, she is of the opinion that marriage and children is really the important job, and the two women part without much agreement. Harriet has "a depressed feeling that she had seen a Derby-winner making shift with a coal cart" (50). That every individual should do the job one is most qualified to do, the "proper job," is a continual theme throughout the novel, and it was one of Sayers' dedicated viewpoints, but as Heilbrun observes in her essay "The Detective Novel of Manners," "she is not writing of those who have no choice" (239).

The first few chapters of *Gaudy Night* contain no mystery, and ardent readers may start to ask "when is the murder," and "where is Wimsey?" There will be no murder, only an attempted one, and Wimsey does not appear until much later, but a mystery slowly develops. When Harriet takes leave of the Dean after the Gaudy, she is

told that if Shrewsbury ever gets a mystery, they will call upon her “to come and disentangle it” (57). And some months afterwards she does indeed get a letter from the Dean asking if she could spare the time to come up and advise them about something unpleasant that has been happening in the college.

The problem is a “poison-pen,” who for months has persecuted them in the form of anonymous letters, obscene drawings and writings on walls, and other unpleasant incidents. Harriet got a letter as well when she attended the Gaudy, but being sensitive about her “past,” she thought she was the only one, and did not mention it to anybody. It appears now that nearly all of the dons, and also some of the students, have received obscene or threatening letters, and poor Miss Lydgate, the English tutor, who is writing a book on prosody, has had her manuscript vandalized. In addition a book in the library about the position of women in the modern state, written by one of the other dons, has been burned.

It seems fairly obvious that the culprit must come from inside the College, and the incidents threaten the stability of the institution. Though women have studied in Oxford since the 1870’s, they were not admitted to full membership until 1919, and Carolyn Hart observes that in the twenties and thirties “women’s colleges were still viewed with suspicion, and by some with dislike” (47). Sexist language was common in the newspapers, “undergraduettes” being only one example. The poet John Betjeman wrote a little book, sketches of university life, called *An Oxford University Chest*, which was published in 1938. The place he allows for women in university is not extensive, and he is on the whole fairly condescending:

I suppose it is only right to bring in undergraduettes, but bringing them in, it would be wrong to give an impression that they play a large part in the social life of the University. [...] Now and then you will meet some outstanding

character, attractive and intelligent. Her influence will pervade a large part of the University. [...] She will fire many young men with a respect for women, by the gracious contrast she makes with the female brain-boxes and some of the women-dons. For the majority of women students are embryo school-mistresses who take everything literally, make copious notes at lectures, talk to one another about the lecturer afterwards, do not bother about personal appearances, carry hundreds of books in the little wicket baskets in front of the handle bars of their bicycles. They think about examinations, and any who think about other things are unlikely to earn the approval of dons. (40)

The bitter Miss Hillyard, the History tutor, discussing with Harriet during the Gaudy, asks her if she really knows any man who admires a woman for her brains. Admitting that the men at the University have been “amazingly kind and sympathetic about the Women’s Colleges,” she adds that they do not appoint women to big University posts, “but they are quite pleased to see us playing with our little toys” (55). The Dean, on the other hand, seeing things from a more relaxed point of view, on the same occasion says to Harriet that “I think it’s perfectly noble of them to let us come trampling over their University at all, bless their hearts” (56).

Bentjeman, discussing dons, concedes that “many male dons dislike women dons, and it is certainly rare to find a woman don who is welcomed in either professional or tutorial circles” (56). He admits that the dislike may be due to personal jealousy between the sexes:

There still prevails an opinion among men that women are better minding their distaffs than correcting Greek accents. A pretty undergraduette can be excused: but a pretty woman don seems an anomaly. Few male dons will put up the anti-feminist argument, as it is too obvious and lays them open to attack. They say, instead, that women alter the standards of examinations. They over-emphasize the necessity for reading and learning and sitting up night after night intoxicated by the fumes of bad coffee, learning lists and arguments and references. (56)

Bentjeman ends his short discussion on women in the university by the following statement: “Whether there should be women dons or whether women should be allowed a university training at all, is a question too large for the scope of the book” (57).

With opinions like that still prevailing in society it is no wonder that the dons at Shrewsbury are eager to prevent any publicity regarding the unpleasant incidents. Even the unmarried dons themselves cannot help thinking that the poison-pen may be one of them, “elderly virgins and all that,” as the Dean says to Harriet, putting words to the kind of publicity they will no doubt get if it comes out (*Gaudy* 76).

Discretion is therefore needed in the investigation, and Harriet agrees to help, drawing on her experience as a writer of detective fiction and assistant in an earlier case. In addition she offers to help Miss Lydgate sort her ruined proofs for the book she is writing. The reason officially given for her staying some time in the college is that she wants to do some research on the life and works of Sheridan Le Fanu, the 19th century suspense novelist. This, incidentally, is one more parallel to Dorothy Sayers herself. Several times Sayers voiced the opinion that detective fiction ought to return to the form of Wilkie Collins and Le Fanu, and she did research on Collins with the intention of writing his biography.

The reader is presented with various characters during the early part of Harriet’s stay at Shrewsbury, characters that throw light on women’s roles, work and education from different angles. There is Miss de Vine, the new research Fellow, a highly intellectual scholar, who believes that facts must never be suppressed. She was once engaged, and discussing the difficulty of combining intellectual and emotional interests with Harriet Vane, she tells her that she broke off the engagement, “in the end I realised that I simply wasn’t taking as much trouble with him as I should have done over a disputed reading. So I decided he wasn’t my job” (172). Miss Shaw, the Modern

Language tutor, is pictured as a proper mother hen, forever worrying about “her” students, claiming she knows all about them. When one of the students is discovered to be in despair because of threatening letters, Miss Shaw exclaims that she cannot understand why the student has not come to her about her troubles, “I always encourage my pupils to give me their full confidence. I asked her again and again”(239). In Nina Auerbach’s opinion both Miss Shaw and Miss Hillyard are familiar stereotypes, the frustrated mother and the bitter spinster, characters which she thinks are realistic in a women’s college, “like life, it has its share of thwarted women” (189).

One of the student characters is Miss Cattermole. She has been sent to college by her parents who believe in higher education for women, but she would rather be a cook. She is unhappy and gets into trouble, and Harriet, having saved her from disgrace, nevertheless exclaims to the Dean that she does not understand why people like Cattermole is being sent to college, taking up the place of people who will enjoy Oxford, “We haven’t got room for women who aren’t and never will be scholars” (*Gaudy* 154). This elitist view-point, which very likely is also Sayers’ point of view, should, however, be judged according to the time the novel was written, a time when women in University were still struggling to be accepted.

Mrs. Goodwin, the Dean’s secretary, is a widow with a small son. He keeps getting sick, which means that his mother is frequently away from work to take care of him. This inevitably starts discussions among the dons, most of them excuse her in spite of the difficulties her absences create. But Miss Hillyard is irritated. She observes that one can not expect anything else when one gives “jobs to widows with children. You have to be prepared for these perpetual interruptions. And for some reason, these domestic pre-occupations always have to be put before the work” (219).

Then there is Annie Wilson, another widow, one of the scouts or College servants, apparently a neat and quiet woman. She has two small girls whom she goes to visit twice a week. When Harriet meets her and speaks to her for the first time, she enquires after her little girls, and Annie beams with pleasure, saying that Harriet also ought to be married and have children of her own, adding that “it seems to me a dreadful thing to see all these unmarried ladies living together. It isn’t natural, is it?”(116). And commenting on the new library building she says that “it seems a great shame to keep up this big place just for women to study books in” (117). Further comments seem to imply that she knows there is something “queer” going on in the college, and that she may know who is the one responsible.

Another time Harriet meets Annie when she is taking her little girls for a walk, and the eight year old Beatrice says that she wants to ride a motor-cycle when she gets bigger:

‘Oh, no darling. What things they say, don’t they, madam?’ ‘Yes, I do’, said Beatrice. ‘I’m going to have a motor-cycle and keep a garage.’ ‘Nonsense,’ said her mother, a little sharply. ‘You mustn’t talk so. That’s a boy’s job.’ ‘But lots of girls do boys’ jobs nowadays,’ said Harriet. ‘But they ought not, madam. It isn’t fair. The boys have hard enough work to get jobs of their own. Please don’t put such things into her head madam. You’ll never get a husband, Beatrice, if you mess about in a garage, getting all ugly and dirty.’ ‘I don’t want one,’ said Beatrice, firmly. ‘I’d rather have a motor-cycle.’ (217)

Harriet had no more to say, “If the woman took the view that any husband was better than none at all, it was useless to argue” (218).

As unpleasant and more serious incidents continue to occur and people are starting to get suspicious of each other, the atmosphere sours in the Senior Common Room, especially after one particular nasty incident one night where extensive

vandalism was committed in the dark, made possible by removed fuses. The “veneer of detachment began to wear thin” (191) and the various members of the S.C.R. start to comment on each others’ possible whereabouts during the various incidents, or exchanging acid remarks, as in the following:

‘Very trying for you, Mrs. Goodwin,’ said Miss Hillyard, ‘to come back to all this upset, just when you needed a rest. I trust your little boy is better. It is particularly tiresome, because all the time you were away, we had no disturbance at all.’ ‘It is most annoying,’ said Mrs. Goodwin. ‘The poor creature who does these things must be quite demented. Of course these disorders do tend to occur in celibate, or chiefly celibate communities. It is a kind of compensation, I suppose, for the lack of other excitements.’ (192)

When a clever but timid student is nearly driven to suicide because of letters she has received, Harriet decides she can no longer continue the investigations all by herself, and is given permission to contact a “firm of private detectives” that she has mentioned earlier to the S.C.R. This is of course Miss Climpson’s agency, which figured so prominently in two earlier novels. But when Harriet telephones the agency in London she is told that Miss Climpson is away on a case. And Miss Murchison, who is the only other woman she knows in the agency, in fact left a year ago to get married! The reader may be tempted to ask why Sayers has decided not to let the resourceful Jane Murchison continue with her job. Harriet feels completely at a loss, and deciding she has to get hold of Wimsey, writes him a letter care of the Foreign Office. By chance he turns up in Oxford already the next day, and finally enters the case, two thirds through the novel.

By the assistance of Harriet’s collected evidence and his own observations during a couple of visits to the College, he soon feels certain who the perpetrator is.

Having by the help of some additional investigations found the proof, Wimsey's exposure of Annie Wilson, the college scout, takes place in a memorable and revealing scene with the Warden and the whole of the S.C.R. present.

Annie was once married to Arthur Robinson, an academic who had falsified his thesis when he applied for a professorship at the University of York. Miss de Vine, who was then on the committee, had discovered this and exposed him. He lost the professorship and his MA degree was taken from him. Within a couple of years he committed suicide, leaving his devoted wife and two small children without much to live on. Annie, filled with the desire for revenge, discovered that Miss de Vine had moved to Oxford. Having got herself a job as a college servant, and taken her maiden name, she at once started her psychological warfare with the intention of ruining both Miss de Vine and the college. She feels hostile to women scholars in general, in her perverted mind they are responsible for taking away men's jobs.

Annie thinks women should marry and stay at home. Sayers has in fact, in the best of puzzle traditions, put in several clues pointing to Annie Wilson. Harriet, however, never saw them. Wimsey is surprised that she never understood who the villain was: "You *must* know, Harriet, if you're giving your mind to the thing at all. [...] For God's sake, put your prejudices aside and think it out. What's happened to you that you can't put two and two together?" (381).

Harriet's prejudices which she can not put aside are of course common prejudices at the time, the sexual myths about the frustrated spinster. Early in the case, worrying about the incidents which continued occurring, "she was suddenly afraid all these women; [...] they were walled in, sealed down, by walls and seals that shut her out" (251). She does not succeed in getting any help from Miss Climpson's agency:

It struck her [...] as a fantastic idea that she should fly for help to another brood of spinsters; even if she succeeded in getting hold of Miss Climpson, how was she to explain matters to that desiccated and elderly virgin? The very sight of some of the poison letters would probably make her sick, and the whole trouble would be beyond her comprehension (251).

But here the narrator breaks in and observes: “In this, Harriet did the lady less than justice; Miss Climpson had seen many strange things in sixty-odd years of boarding-house life, and was as free from repressions and complexes as any human being could very well be” (251).

When Wimsey arrives and goes through the facts with Harriet, they discuss the motive, which to her seems obvious, and he has to ask her: “Do all these facts taken together suggest nothing to you beyond a general notion of sex repression?” (284). It is Wimsey who sees beyond this popular notion, observing that “the biggest crime of these blasted psychologists is to have obscured the obvious” (284).

Wimsey is here referring to Freudianism which was fashionable in the twenties. Sheila Jeffreys, in her book *The Spinster and her Enemies*, comments:

the concept of the ‘prude’ [...] was refined during the 1920s with the aid of psychoanalytic ‘insights’ about repression. The concept of ‘repression’ explained the development of the ‘prude’. It was asserted that ‘repression’ of the supposedly innate and powerful sexual urge would cause that urge to find its outlet in a lurid interest in things sexually disguised as disgust and condemnation” (191).

As Merryn Williams observes, “These ‘insights’ had filtered their way down, via the press, into popular consciousness [...] Even Harriet, who ought to know better, assumes that a female scholar must be responsible” (95).

The sex reform movement in the twenties was in some ways revolutionary. Among the most important changes from earlier Victorian attitudes to sex, was the recognition that also women had a right to sexual pleasure. But Jeffreys argues that the sexologists promoted an ideology which was hostile to women's independence. "The greatest change was in the eroticising of the married woman. The 1920s saw a massive campaign by sexologists and sex advice writers to conscript women into marriage [...]" (166). The result was a glorification of motherhood.

In *Gaudy Night* it is not only Annie Wilson who seems to be influenced by this view. In several of the discussions in the S.C.R the question of motherhood is directly or indirectly touched upon, discussions often started because of Mrs Goodwin's frequent absences. This leads to a heated exchange of words regarding women, work and children, Miss Hillyard being the most active:

The fact is, though you will never admit it, that everybody in this place has an inferiority complex about married women and children. For all your talk about careers and independence, you all believe in your hearts that we ought to abase ourselves before any woman who has fulfilled her animal functions. (220)

Though she is answered by one of the others that this is absolutely nonsense, Miss Lydgate, who is about to finish her very important book on prosody says: "It is natural, I suppose, to feel that married women lead a fuller life" (220).

One of the clues to the motive and an incident that points to Annie Wilson as the culprit once one knows the story, is the mutilation of several pages in a book from the library, *The Search* by C. P. Snow. Wimsey is invited for dinner at the College, and when everyone afterwards has coffee in the Senior Common Room, the theme of

conversation centres around the concern for truth and one's obligation to one's job. To suppress a fact is to suppress a falsehood, no matter what the fact, is a statement made.

C. P. Snow's book is about Miles, a young aspiring scientist who fails to be appointed to an important job everyone thinks he will get. The reason is that he has made a careless mistake in a paper he has just had published, he did not check the results done by his assistant. The discussion continues in the S.C.R. about truth and the need to be absolutely honest about one's work, even an unintentional error will not do in science. And what is the point of deliberate falsification? "What satisfaction could one possibly get out of a reputation one knew one didn't deserve?" cries Miss Lydgate (329).

In *The Search* Miles later discovers that a friend of his has deliberately falsified a result, and he decides to say nothing because of the economic situation of his friend and his family. In the discussion following there seems to be nobody present in the S.C.R. who sanctions such a behaviour, "not for ten wives and fifty children" (329). And it is in this connection that Miss de Vine tells them about Arthur Robinson and her exposure of him some years back. And none of the dons present think she could have done anything else. Wimsey, who cleverly has led the discussion in this direction, then gets the information he needs. With the assistance of Miss Climpson's sleuths he finds out who Robinson was and that he was the husband of Annie, now a scout at Shrewsbury College.

Annie Wilson Robinson is the culprit, a culprit who by her letters and acts of vandalism had signalled both madness and sexual pathology. But instead of a celibate scholar, the poison-pen is a working-class mother. Arthur Robinson had been "hampered a little in his social career by having in a weak moment married the

landlady's daughter" (362). Annie has only contempt for the world of learning.

Confronting Miss de Vine at the unmasking, she cries:

[...] couldn't you leave my man alone? He told a lie about somebody else who was dead and dust hundreds of years ago. Nobody was the worse for that. Was a dirty bit of paper more important than all our lives and happiness? You broke him and killed him – all for nothing. Do you think that's a woman's job? (427).

After having finished with Miss de Vine, she continues the attack addressing them all in general, and finally lashes out : "You couldn't even find out who was doing it – that's all your wonderful brains come to [...] You can't do anything for yourselves. Even you, you silly old hags – you had to get a man to do your work for you" (428).

Then the time has come for Harriet and Wimsey to get their share before she repeats to them all that she had had a husband whom she loved, and "you were jealous of me and you killed him," before she bursts out crying (429). As an anticlimax she is quietly led out by two of the dons, and the problem is later being "medically dealt with," without bringing in police or prison. "The Senior Common Room, recovering a little from its shock, went quietly about the business of the term. They were all normal again. They had never been anything else"(434). The perpetrator was not a sexually unhinged spinster after all, but "a traditional woman who has no respect for the intellect," as Merryn Williams puts it (95). In her view "the whole point of the novel is that spinster dons are not neurotic, but creative women" (96).

Gender prejudices play an important part in the novel. But these are not the only prejudices in *Gaudy Night*. Several signs of class prejudice are seen when the possible malefactor is discussed. In the beginning the members of the Senior Common Room do not think that the poison-pen is one of them because of the coarse words being used in

the letters. They find it much more likely that it is one of the scouts, somebody of “that class.” One of the students who is found walking around in the corridors at night is also a possibility, because although able, “her antecedents are not particularly refined,”(121) meaning that she might well be suspected of knowing such words. However, the letters contain no spelling mistakes which makes the whole thing more confusing. And the vandalizing of Miss Lydgate’s proofs points to an “educated person.” Another opinion, on the other hand, is that the destruction of the proofs may mean that the villain knows nothing about their value.

One of the more disturbing incidents is a dummy dressed in a don’s gown and cap with a knife stuck through the body. Pinned to it was a paper with a classic quotation. Observing the paper, Harriet concludes that the scouts can not be suspected of “expressing their feelings in Virgilian hexameters” (147). Later it is discovered that this quotation had been in the suicide letter left by Annie’s husband, and had been translated by the coroner at the inquest. One may argue that the reason that Harriet Vane fails to solve the case in spite of all her good efforts is that she is prevented by her class prejudices, she assumes that the knowledge of a classic citation is beyond the capabilities of a servant.

More important, however, is that Harriet is hampered by emotion. Trying to use her intellect, which is what she wants to do, her reasoning is clouded by fright. Watching these celibate women makes her begin to doubt whether this “cloistered” life is as desirable as she has imagined. Wimsey sees this, he has realized that she is considering “a spot of celibacy” herself, and tells her that her fears are distorting her judgement. He says that the problem can be solved by “a little straight and unprejudiced reasoning.” But Harriet is in this case experiencing a conflict between “head” and “heart.” Wimsey states, when he sums up the case, that “something got between you

and the facts” (420). Rational thinking, which is essential in the solving of the crime in a classical detective story, is beyond Harriet Vane, who at this time finds herself in an emotional turmoil, wondering about the direction of her personal life.

When Sayers in 1937 in the essay “Gaudy Night” looks back, she says that having once decided to write about a community of academic women, she did not have great difficulties with the plot, which should exhibit intellectual integrity. Because of the theme, it was necessary that “the malice should be the product, not of intellect starved of emotion, but of emotion uncontrolled by intellect.” And in order to create a tight plot it also “must be emotion revenging itself upon the intellect for some injury wrought by the intellect upon the emotions” (214). Annie represents the emotion revenging itself upon the intellect. But things did not work out as she had expected, as Wimsey says to the S.C.R. during his denouement, but before Annie is brought in:

Will you let me say, here and now, that the one thing that frustrated the whole attack from first to last was the remarkable solidarity and public spirit displayed by your college as a body. I think that was the last obstacle that X expected to encounter in a community of women. Nothing but the very great loyalty of the Senior Common Room to the College and the respect of the students for the Senior Common Room stood between you and a most unpleasant publicity. (415)

Wimsey, who soon after his appearance saw the solution to the incidents in the College, also understood this community of women.

Auerbach, who in her essay “Dorothy L. Sayers and the Amazons” is critical of several parts of the novel, nevertheless praises the concept of showing a community of women who are not defined by negation. She observes that Sayers reveals that these women have not sacrificed themselves, but that they enjoy their life and their work. “No

other academic novel that I know of captures so well the fun that peers out from the methodological rigor and high seriousness of academic life, and the exhilarating privilege of belonging to it” (188).

The description of the life in the College and the conversations about truth and reason may be looked upon as a contrast to the threat of fascism. It is possible to read Annie Wilson’s views on the role of women, and her vandalism of the books as an illustration of Nazi ideology. The novel is taking place during one year, from June 1934 till June 1935, and there are several references to the growing international tension at the time. Germany is referred to in passing during the *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* discussions. The theme of sterilisations for the unfit crops up, “they’re trying it in Germany,” said Miss Edwards, the biologist, “together with the relegation of woman to her proper place in the home,” Miss Hillyard adds, never missing a chance of commenting on the motherhood ideology (325).

That there is reason to worry about the international situation is particularly exemplified by the frequent reference to Wimsey’s diplomatic work for the Foreign Office. When he finally enters the novel, having just returned from several weeks of work on the Continent, he is very tired. When Harriet asks him about what he has been doing, he says that he takes “people out to lunch and tell them funny stories and work them up to mellowing point.” And he tells her that recent difficult talks have made him say to Bunter: “It’s coming; it’s here; back to the Army again, sergeant” (269).

In Kuhn McGregor’s view “the shadow of totalitarianist threat broods through the entire novel” (162). There is one example which is both amusing and slightly frightening. Padgett, the College porter, is working with a decorator foreman to clean up after the “poltergeist” has splashed paint in the new library, and their conversation is overheard by Harriet and the Dean passing by:

‘Young ladies’, Padgett was heard to say, ‘will ‘ave their larks, same as young gentlemen.’ ‘When I was a lad,’ replied the foreman, ‘young ladies was young ladies. And young gentlemen was young gentlemen. If you get my meaning.’ ‘Wot this country wants,’ said Padgett, ‘is a ‘Itler.’ ‘That’s right,’ said the foreman. ‘Keep the girls at ‘ome.’ (*Gaudy* 115)

To the reader it may come as a surprise to hear Padgett utter these words, he is shown to be a most reliable man, who stoically undertakes the most varied assignments in the College. At the same time it seems important to remind oneself that Padgett said this in 1935 and not for instance in 1945, a fact that may soften the statement.

The rest of the conversation between him and the foreman rounds up the argument, but in a more comic way, the foreman commenting:

‘Funny kind ‘o job you got ‘ere, mate. Wot was you, afore you took to keepin’ a ‘en ‘ouse?’ ‘ ‘Assistant camel ‘and at the Zoo. Very interesting job it was, too.’ ‘Wot made you chuck it?’ ‘Blood-poison. I was bit in the arm,’ said Padgett, ‘by a female.’ ‘Ah!’ said the foreman decorator. (115)

Padgett is given additional room in the novel apart from his job as a porter. When Wimsey leaves the College after dinner, he is greeted by the words “Good night, major Wimsey, sir!” (336), and Wimsey discovers that this is Corporal Padgett from the last war, nearly twenty years back, where he served under Wimsey. Apparently he was even one of the men who helped to pull Wimsey out of the dug-out where he was nearly buried alive. Their “stream of reminiscence ran remorselessly on” (338) while Harriet stood listening, and after Wimsey had gone, Padgett continued telling her a long story about a mop and a bucket, all in the best comedy of manners style.

By putting in this story about Major Padgett and Corporal Padgett, Sayers links

the time of the mid-thirties to the time of the Great War. This may be interpreted as one way of showing the shadow of a new war. But Kuhn McGregor is also of the opinion that the character Padgett is meant to mean something more. He argues that Padgett despite his admirable qualities, “is deeply flawed: he does not think save in conventions.” In his opinion Sayers “addresses the question of totalitarianism most obviously in her drawing of [...] Padgett,” whom he sees as a man “who was only too happy to follow” (165). This may seem harsh, and in my view is open for discussion. Padgett’s view about women’s changing role was common, and as for his carrying out the various assignments without question, it is certainly possible to look upon this differently, interpreting it as showing his resources as a porter. One example which may support this is his assignment by Wimsey in the coal cellar. He finds the key that Annie has hid there when she pretended that she had been locked in.

Wimsey gets his share of Annie Wilson’s venom during the unmasking. His vulnerability is shown when she spits in his face and calls him a “rotten little white-faced rat” (*Gaudy* 429). One of Sayers’ intentions with the novel was to continue to humanize Lord Peter Wimsey. She has finally decided to bring him and Harriet Vane together, but she realized that she could not do this before Wimsey had become a more complete human being. Still, she claims that “even at the beginning he had not been the complete silly ass: he had only played the silly ass, which was not the same thing” (“*Gaudy Night*” 211).

In *Gaudy Night* he is seen through Harriet’s eyes, and she, who has only been aware of his strength, now sees his vanity and weaknesses as well. There is the time when Harriet says to Wimsey that she recognized his young nephew because he had the same hands as his uncle, which makes him admit that “I am idiotically proud of having inherited the Wimsey hands” (271). He also discloses that he has strong feelings for

Duke's Denver although he thinks that "Our kind of show is dead and done for" (272). Harriet is surprised, she has never thought of him as sentimental. He also shows his jealousy of his handsome nephew, and of Harriet's admirer, the undergraduate Pomfret, by getting into a near fight with him. He writes him a pompous letter, admitting to Harriet that he hates "being loomed over by gigantic undergraduates and made to feel my age" (375).

Observing Wimsey in Oxford also makes her see him in a different light. She has always associated him with the hectic London life, but seeing him in the quiet surroundings of Oxford, he seems to belong just as much there, "wearing cap and gown like any orthodox Master of Arts [...] and now talking mild academic shop with two Fellows of All Souls and the Master of Balliol" (266). She feels ashamed that she did not know that he had taken a First in History, she has never bothered to find out.

And she now recognizes that Wimsey is seriously interested in her work. She is struggling with her latest novel which seems without life. When he asks her how she is getting on, she tells him about it, and he offers some suggestions about how to improve it by working on the characters. Writing about feelings is something she has been reluctant to do ever since her trial, but he encourages her and says that she has not yet written the book she could write if she tried.

Still burdened by her gratitude for his once saving her life, here in Oxford she is slowly experiencing a feeling of equality. Writing to her before he arrives, commenting on her disagreeable job, Wimsey does not complain that he is not there to protect her, or expresses offers of help, which he knows that she will resent. Instead he says that he knows that "disagreeableness and danger will not turn you back, and God forbid they should" (209). Harriet reflects: "If he conceived of marriage along those lines, then the whole problem would have to be reviewed in that new light," and she writes back

thanking him for not having asked her to run away and play, “that’s the best compliment you ever paid me” (210). When he does come, he teaches her self-defence, which in fact comes in handy when she is attacked. He grants her the right to run her own risks, showing that he values her as an independent person. It is Miss de Vine, who herself has made the choice of staying single, who states that Harriet does not need to be afraid of losing her independence, because “he will always force it back on you” (432). The fact that Harriet is in love with Wimsey is shown several times during the novel, the reader understands it before she understands it herself. The moment on the river makes her understand that she can no longer run away from her feelings. When Wimsey is reclining in the boat reading Harriet’s dossier on the case, she is studying him, noticing every part of his face and neck. When he suddenly looks up, she goes instantly scarlet. He understands, but continues reading. “So, thought Harriet, it has happened. But it happened long ago. The only new thing that has happened is that now I have got to admit it to myself” (283). He does not take advantage of the moment, but leaves her to make her own decision. And Harriet makes her conscious choice, seeing that she and Wimsey will be able to live together as equals with mutual respect for each other and each other’s work. There is no danger of her having to make Wimsey “her job.” On the last page of the novel Wimsey finds “the word that should carry her over the last difficult breach [...] ‘*Placetne, magistra?*’ ‘*Placet*’ ” (441).

As Reynolds explains in her biography, these words, which mean “does it please?” – “it pleases,” are used in connection with a degree ceremony when a candidate is presented for graduation (260). Reynolds also quotes a letter Dorothy Sayers wrote to a girl friend while she was a student at Somerville College, where she in related words describes this ceremony where she was present (56).

In a novel so self-consciously “academic” it seems only appropriate that the proposal should be in Latin. There are numerous quotes in French and Latin, never translated, and each chapter is headed by literary excerpts. Many looked upon this as intellectual elitism, it only added to the opinion by some commentators who have remarked on the social snobbery in Sayers’ writing. Q.D.Leavis was one of her fiercest critics. In her attack on the novel in *Scrutiny* in 1937, she dismisses Sayers as having “an appearance of literariness” (334). But James Brabazon observes that the public at large “did not have Mrs. Leavis’s preoccupations; [...] And other reviewers, on the whole, acknowledged how well Dorothy had brought off the grafting of high thinking on to the detective story stock, even if some of them did think she had rather overdone the loyalty to Oxford” (154).

Sayers, in her Introduction to *Great Tales of Detection*, expressed the hope that writers would be able to combine various elements, “so that the intellectual and the common man can find common ground for enjoyment in the mystery novel as once they did in Greek and Elizabethan tragedy” (xiii). Looking at the statement it seems likely that this is one of the things she had in mind when writing *Gaudy Night*, and the above citation by Brabazon may indicate that she succeeded.

In her essay “Gaudy Night” she says that in her novel the plot and the theme is the same thing, “that the same intellectual honesty that is essential to scholarship is essential also to the conduct of life” (216). Discussing this, she is of the opinion that the *setting* must be an integral part of both theme and plot in a detective novel. Having by some critics been accused of the novel’s lack of construction, she argues that *Gaudy Night* has a very clear construction: “the setting is a women’s college; the plot derives from, and develops through, episodes that could not have occurred in any other place; and the theme is the relation of scholarship to life” (217). That not everybody thought

this was as clear as Sayers herself did is not surprising, especially considering the length of the novel, which sometimes makes it difficult to keep track of the theme. On the other hand one may argue that this integration of setting, plot and theme is what makes the novel more interesting to read than a straightforward puzzle.

Although *Gaudy Night* did not conform to the expected formula of the detective story, it sold extremely well. Sayers herself thought that part of the reason was “that it dealt in a knowledgeable way with the daily life of a little-known section of the community” (218). Another reason is probably that the public wanted to read about the final coming-together of Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane. And in spite of all the long and learned conversations, the familiar Sayers style is also there. The devoted reader finds it in the humorous descriptions of Miss Cattermole and her nightly excursion, in the discussion about the “popping” of shirt-fronts, and when Wimsey meets an old college friend on the river and is confronted with his behaviour when he was a student at Balliol.

In what way then does *Gaudy Night* move beyond the assumed form of the genre? For one thing there is no murder, something which everyone expected from a classical detective story. And the Great Detective does not turn up until well into the novel. Instead it starts with a lengthy description of Harriet Vane’s return visit to Oxford, full of nostalgia for the landscape and the College, and the meeting of old friends and staff. Then there are increased complexities of character compared to the accepted formula, above all of Lord Peter Wimsey. Although Julian Symons claims that Wimsey “remains essentially unchanged” (134), most readers will probably disagree with him in this. Wimsey is presented as a well-rounded character. This Sayers has done, as she has explained in “*Gaudy Night*,” to be able to let Harriet accept his proposal of marriage. Besides she also acknowledges that if a character remains static,

his creator wearies of him. By letting the “love interest” be such an important part of the novel, Sayers has of course violated another of the formula’s rules, one which she in the twenties herself had spoken strongly in favour of.

On the other hand there are several rules that are not violated in the novel. Playing-fair-with-the-reader, always important to Sayers, is one of them. Clues pointing to the villain are scattered all through the novel. One may also spot red herrings, herrings which lead to the “celibates.” And in the best manner of the classic detective story, there is the denouement by the Detective towards the end, when all the main characters are assembled.

However, it is not difficult to understand the reactions of readers who expected a straight “whodunit.” Many have probably yawned through large parts where “nothing” happens. Symons had admiration for Sayers’ intelligence, but an increasing dislike for her detective novels which he thinks are full of “padding.” He finds *Gaudy Night* “full of the most tedious pseudo-serious chat between the characters that goes on for page after page” (134) . Very likely he is here also thinking of the conversation covering the whole of Chapter XVII. But Reynolds takes an altogether different view: “The conversation [...] while it skilfully serves both theme and plot, is also a *tour de force* in intellectual elegance which can scarcely have been surpassed in modern fiction” (255). According to one’s expectations it is, I feel, possible to understand both views.

Sayers herself tells in “Gaudy Night” about her wish to write a “straight” novel about an Oxford woman graduate and intellectual integrity, and how she found that she could make the theme integral to the detective plot and the “love-interest” and thus combine the three. When some of her friends had their doubts about how the public would react, she says that she knew “it was useless to try and write with a view to what

the public might like: the only thing one can do is to write what one wants to write and hope for the best” (217).

The parallel to Harriet Vane and her struggles with her current book is clear. In fact, Sayers’ argument about the need to make the detective novel less like a mechanical puzzle and more like a novel is indirectly brought in when Wimsey and Harriet discuss her book. When Harriet explains her difficulties, he suggests: “you would have to abandon the jig-saw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change” (*Gaudy* 292). And he brushes aside her protests that it will hurt, challenging her by saying: “what would that matter if it made a good book?” (293).

How much of Sayers is there in Harriet Vane? One may argue that Harriet to a large extent is the implied author of the novel. Sayers’ friend Muriel St. Claire Byrne who read the book before it was published, thought that it was too autobiographical. Sayers denied this, but admitted that “it presents a consistent philosophy of conduct for which I am prepared to assume personal responsibility.” Barbara Reynolds is of the opinion that there are very many parallels, and therefore finds the Harriet Vane character “all the more credible” (254).

Feminist critics have acclaimed *Gaudy Night* as a classic, and the first feminist mystery novel. Sayers’ feminist characters range from the dons to Beatrice, Annie Wilson’s daughter. The role of women in society is explored at great length, Sayers has managed to make the question integral to the whole plot.

Dorothy Sayers’ wish to write about “intellectual integrity” has resulted in a novel where the mystery may be regarded as a very minor part, although it is well integrated in the theme. One may argue that Sayers has stretched the detective novel to its limits. *Gaudy Night* may be regarded as a combination of mystery and romance, but also as a novel of ideas, and where the balance is in favour of the love interest. In a

letter Sayers sent to her publisher it is evident that she realized the genre problems of the novel: "Whether you advertise it as a love-story or as educational propaganda, or as a lunatic freak, I leave it to you" (Reynolds 261). But she also said that she had written the novel she wanted to write. However, one may be permitted to ask whether Sayers has expanded the possibilities of the genre or whether *Gaudy Night* is a detective novel at all.

Conclusion

Between the first and the last novel that have been presented in this thesis there is a span of twelve years. The presentation hopefully renders an impression of the gradual change in Dorothy Sayers' detective novels from *Whose Body?* which, although entertaining and having an interesting plot, is more like a conventional puzzle, to *Gaudy Night*, which is a "serious" novel where the mystery is no longer the centre of interest.

According to what Sayers had in mind, the novels show a deepening of character analysis. Other novels, like *Murder Must Advertise* and *The Nine Tailors*, not included in this study, might also have helped to highlight the development from mystery to manners. In all the chosen novels, which represent English life in the period between the wars, the mystery blends with social and political issues.

Gaudy Night was Dorothy Sayers' penultimate novel, after which she only wrote *Busman's Honeymoon*, published in 1937. This novel, however, originated as a play which she wrote in collaboration with a friend who was an experienced playwright. After having obtained a producer, the play ran for nine months in the West End. Sayers wrote the novel after the play, and subtitled it "A Love Story with Detective Interruptions." The subtitle is appropriate, as it starts with Wimsey and Harriet getting married, and then the rest of the novel takes place in the country during the first part of their honeymoon, where a murder to a certain extent interrupts the bliss. In spite of the murder, the novel is much less serious than *Gaudy Night*, with a witty dialogue and some very funny supporting characters.

As it turned out, this was to be Sayers' last complete detective novel. She did start on one more which she called *Thrones, Denominations*, but this was left unfinished until 1998 when it was completed by Jill Paton Walsh. Kuhn McGregor has an

interesting theory about why Sayers did not finish this novel which was to be a further exploration of marriage. In the manuscript the death of King George V is commented on, and she had plans of elaborating on this important event. But seeing how things turned out in the months afterwards, with the abdication of Edward VIII, she found it impossible to continue. In Kuhn McGregor's opinion "Sayers had allowed herself to be trapped by historical events" (199). After this she only wrote a couple of short stories.

Why did Sayers stop writing detective novels twenty years before she died? She does not seem to have had any intention to do so. In "Gaudy Night" from 1937 she writes in fact that "I can see no end to Peter this side of the grave" (220). Critics have had various theories round this, but the reason may be just coincidental judging from available biographical material. For the first few years before and during the war her work turned in the direction of the writing of religious plays. As the years passed Lord Peter Wimsey quietly "died." Maybe Sayers had come to the conclusion that a "love interest" is best left out of detective novels after all? The last fourteen years of her life were devoted to the translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. She continued, however, to give talks and write essays on detective fiction and other subjects.

Are people still reading Dorothy Sayers' detective novels? The answer to this must be yes, the books keep being reprinted. Many modern critics seem to agree that she was plowing new ground with her detective stories, and that many later writers have been influenced by her. P. D. James is one of them, and in her Foreword to Brabazon's biography she observes that Sayers' novels so clearly reflect their time. Pitt also comments that "it is an increasing strength of the novels [...] that in her concern for detailed verisimilitude Sayers anchors them [...] in real time, her own time" (105). Heilbrun, in her essay "Biography Between the Lines," thinks the Wimsey books will endure "for the reasons books do endure: because they give pleasure and because,

beneath their glittering surface, they question the society they portray” (13). P. D. James praises her for “her refreshing humour which is rare in detective fiction” (xv), and I want to argue that Sayers’ verbal wit may be the most important reason for her still being popular among readers of crime fiction.

Bibliography

- Auden, W.H. "The Guilty Vicarage". *The Dyer's Hand*. London: Faber and Faber, 1962.
- Auerbach, Nina. *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Betjeman, John. *An Oxford University Chest*. 1938. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979.
- Brabazon, James. *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Life of a Courageous Woman*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1981.
- Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. London: Oxford UP, 1975.
- Gaillard, Dawson. *Dorothy L. Sayers*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981.
- Graves, Robert, and Alan Hodge. *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939*. London: Faber & Faber, 1950.
- Hart, Carolyn G. "Gaudy Night. Quintessential Sayers." *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration*. Ed. Alzina Stone Dale. New York: Walker, 1993.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn. "The Detective Novel of Manners." *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women: Feminist Essays on Literature*. London: Women's Press, 1991.
- _____. "Dorothy L. Sayers: Biography Between the Lines." *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration*. Ed. Alzina Stone Dale. New York: Walker, 1993.
- Holquist, Michael. "Whodunit and Other Questions." *The Poetics of Murder*. Eds. G Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Hynes, Samuel. *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. New York: Atheneum, 1991.
- Jeffreys, Sheila. *The Spinster and her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930*. London: Pandora, 1985.
- Knight, Stephen. *Crime Fiction 1800-2000*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Lewis, Terrance L. *Dorothy L. Sayers' Wimsey and Interwar British Society*. Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1994.
- Leavis, Q.D. "The Case of Miss Dorothy Sayers," *Scrutiny* 6 (1937): 334-340.

- Light, Alison. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- McGregor, Robert Kuhn, with Ethan Lewis. *Conundrums for the Long Week-End: England, Dorothy L. Sayers and Lord Peter Wimsey*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 2000.
- Most, Glenn W., and William W. Stone, eds. *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Plain, Gill. *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996.
- Porter, Dennis. *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1981.
- Pitt, Valerie. "Dorothy Sayers: The Masks of Lord Peter." *Twentieth Century Suspense: The Thriller Comes of Age*. Ed. Clive Bloom. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.
- Reynolds, Barbara. *Dorothy L. Sayers. Her Life and Soul*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993.
- Sayers, Dorothy L., Introduction. *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*. Ed. Dorothy Sayers. London: Victor Gollancz, 1928.
- _____. "Gaudy Night." *The Art of the Mystery Story*. Ed. Howard Haycraft. New York: Carroll and Graf, 1946. (Originally in *Titles to Fame*. Ed. Dennis K. R. Roberts. London: Nelson, 1937.)
- _____. "Are Women Human?" *Unpopular Opinions*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1946.
- _____. "Aristotle on Detective Fiction." *Unpopular Opinions*. London: Viktor Gollancz, 1946.
- _____. Introduction. *Great Tales of Detection*. Ed. Dorothy Sayers. London: Dent, 1976.
- _____. Introduction. *The Moonstone*. By Wilkie Collins. London: Dent, 1944.
- _____. *Whose Body?* 1923. London: New English Library, 1975.
- _____. *Clouds of Witness*. 1926. London: New English Library, 1975.
- _____. *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*. 1928. London: New English Library, 2003.

- _____. *Unnatural Death*. 1927. London: Victor Gollancz, 1956.
- _____. *Strong Poison*. 1930. London: Victor Gollancz, 1946.
- _____. *Have His Carcase*. 1932. London: New English Library, 1977.
- _____. *Murder Must Advertise*. 1933. London: Victor Gollancz, 1938.
- _____. *The Nine Tailors*. 1934. Kent: New English Library, 1984.
- _____. *Gaudy Night*. 1935. London: New English Library, 1975.
- _____. *Busman's Honeymoon*. 1937. London: New English Library, 1974.
- Sayers, Dorothy L. with Jill Paton Walsh. *Thrones, Dominations*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998.
- Snow, C.P. *The Search*. 1934. London: MacMillan, 1958.
- Symons, Julian. *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.
- Taylor, A.J.P. *English History 1914-1945*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965.
- Watson, Colin. *Snobbery with Violence: Crime Stories and their Audience*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971.
- Williams, Merryn. *Six Women Novelists*. Basingstoke: MacMillan Education, 1987.
- Winks, Robin, ed. *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980.
- Winter, Jay. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.